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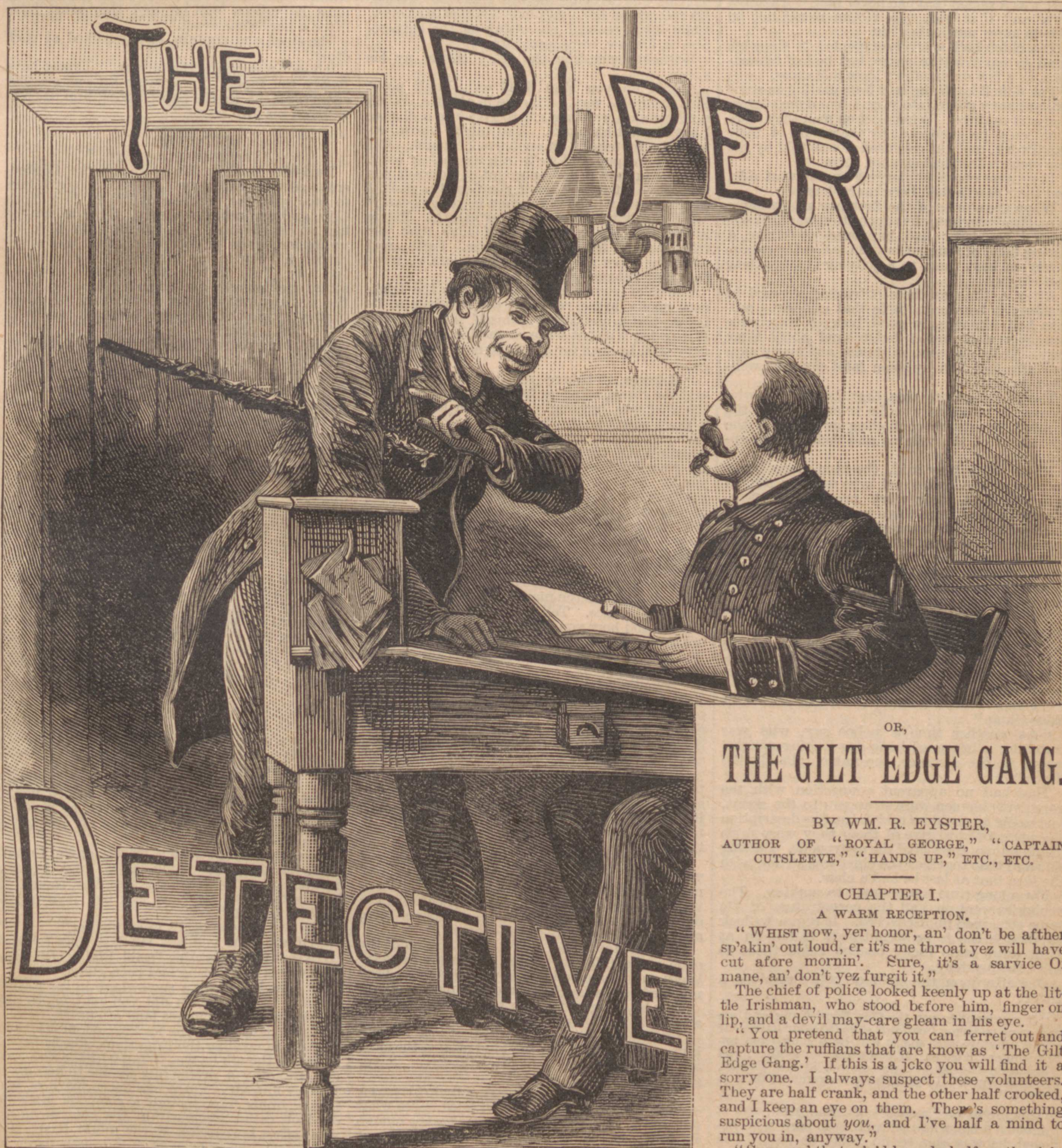
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"AN' IT'S ROIGHT YEZ ARE. OI'M ONE AV THE GANG, AZ SHURE AZ ME NAME'S PADDY THE PIPER."

OR, THE GILT EDGE GANG.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "ROYAL GEORGE," "CAPTAIN
CUTSLEEVE," "HANDS UP," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A WARM RECEPTION.

"WHIST now, yer honor, an' don't be afther sp'akin' out loud, er it's me throat yez will have cut afore mornin'. Sure, it's a sarvice Oi mane, an' don't yez furgit it."

The chief of police looked keenly up at the little Irishman, who stood before him, finger on lip, and a devil may-care gleam in his eye.

"You pretend that you can ferret out and capture the ruffians that are know as 'The Gilt Edge Gang.' If this is a jcke you will find it a sorry one. I always suspect these volunteers. They are half crank, and the other half crooked, and I keep an eye on them. Ther's something suspicious about *you*, and I've half a mind to run you in, anyway."

"Sure, an' that w'u'd be only half av the job, an' whin Oi got out ag'in there would be no chance at all at all, an' Oi'd give yez a whack on

ther gob some darruk noight fur ther dirty, mane thrick thet ye'd sarved me."

"When you got out—yes," answered the chief, with a load of irony in his tone. "But twenty years from now you won't be thinking much about whacking anybody. At sixty men of your kidney are pretty well broken up, besides being cautious. However, I never forget, and when you get out I'll have you watched, and see that you do no mischief."

"An' how owld does yez think Oi am now?"

There was a cunning twinkle in the ferret-like eyes as he asked the question.

"About forty, though you look older. The fact is, I suppose you are getting to years of discretion and want to square yourself with the police. You've got to an age when you see that if you don't mend your ways you'll come down with a rush. Of course you have been on the cross."

"An' it's roight yez are. Oi'm one ov the gang, az shure az me name's Paddy the Piper!"

The chief was not a man that usually showed surprise, even if he felt any, but at the careless announcement the whole expression of his countenance changed. He sprang to his feet, threw his hands up over his head with a gesture that had its meaning and exclaimed:

"Down with him!"

From a panel-door that had opened noiselessly at the back of the little Irishman, a man sprang out and threw himself upon his shoulders.

The chances were ninety-nine out of a hundred that the action was a complete surprise.

It was a racket that had never been worked before, and if it had, the victim would not be able to know much about it.

The chief had scarcely expected to show his hand so early in the game, but he had his reasons, as a few explanatory lines will show.

The Gilt Edge Gang had been getting in some rather heavy work lately, and had defied detection and capture. What sort of men they were could only be guessed at by the nature of their handiwork, and the confused stories told by the few victims that had escaped them.

They were operating largely on the west side, and their success had been marvelous.

When the stories of the first few affairs came in at Headquarters, the supposition was that the belated wanderer had happened to strike a roving band of roughs that had taken the opportunity to beat them to a jelly and empty their pockets.

After a time, as these outrages increased in number, it became notable that either the robbers had remarkably good luck, or they were strangely well posted beforehand about their prey. They made no mistakes, and every man they attacked had by some fatal chance a well-filled pocketbook.

The puzzling thing was, that the few men who recovered sufficiently to be interviewed in the hospital, gave such conflicting accounts of the operations of the villains and their general appearance.

From what they said, the men were burly ruffians of the lowest sort, who were as ragged and brutal as their work pronounced them. Plenty of men were there in the city to answer the description; but unfortunately none of them were ever on the spot at the alleged time of the robberies; and the police scratched their heads while declaring that it was a moral impossibility that any such men could pass through their beats without having been noticed.

The only thing that at all resembled a clew, was an exclamation overheard by a man whose skull had been fractured and the whole of his face stove in. Nevertheless, he had a momentary return to consciousness, and in that moment heard a harsh voice mutter:

"That's four thousand more fur the Gilt Edge Gang."

At another time a police spy, who was watching a brace of hang-dog-looking roughs, heard, in the distance, the name, "Paddy the Piper."

That had no apparent connection with the gang, yet the men were strangers to the agent, and so far as could be told from the description the agent tried to give of them they were none of the known thieves of the metropolis. Putting this and that together the chief was struck with the idea that at last he had a clew.

For a long time it amounted to nothing. The robberies went on, and the perpetrators of the same remained undiscovered. It began to look as though the force would have to remain at fault until some lucky chance aided them to solve the mystery.

One afternoon the chief of police received a letter:

"If you want to get the Gilt Edge Gang and we can come to terms I can put them in your hands. If you don't close with me, it will be a long time before you catch them. If you want the chance, and will act on the square, put an ad. in the Herald, 'Take the butt.' I will make arrangements then to see you."

This might be "a stall" of some kind, and it might be a *bona fide* offer from a man who believed he was able to do what he said. The chief took the matter into serious consideration, and the result was an advertisement, followed

by a careful correspondence, and ending in this interview.

So, when the little Irishman announced that he was one of the gang, and that his name was Paddy the Piper, the surprised chief thought it might be best to gather him in first, and come to terms afterward.

So he sprang to his feet and gave the signal, and Captain Hardy swooped down on the little man without even giving him time to suspect what was coming. Between them there was no doubt but that the victory must be on the side of the law.

The only difficulty was with Paddy himself.

He wouldn't hold still!

Just how he worked the trick was not so easy to see; and it looked as though he must have eyes in the back of his head. As Hardy sprang forward the little Irishman doubled himself up into a sort of ball, and flung himself backward. Then the captain's heels went up into the air, and his head struck the floor with a thwack that temporarily dazed him, while Paddy the Piper's knees dropped upon his arms, a set of sinewy fingers clasped his throat, and at the same time the chief found himself looking straight into a pistol barrel.

"Arrah, now, w'u'd yez, me honnies? Sure, an' it's Paddy the Piper that is able fur the raft av yez! Don't yez sthur a step av yez don't want yer brains bespatterin' ther floor."

The chief was a man who had taken large chances in his day and he had undoubted nerve, but never had he been so taken aback. He had expected a struggle and an attempt to escape, but this was carrying the war right into Africa. He recognized the man's wonderful skill at once, while there seemed no mistaking the earnestness in his low, compressed tones.

Without hesitation the chief threw up his hands.

"Hold on, you idiot! hold on! Don't point that thing this way. I'll give in at once. When a man comes wanting me to give him a chance I have to test his nerve. You might know better than to take it in such dead earnest. Put up your weapon and we'll talk the matter over. If you can give a good account of yourself you shall have a trial. Then if you floor the gang I assure you it will be big money in your pocket."

"Yez talk too much wid yer mouth. Mebbe it would be ez well ter see if Oi've bruk yer fri'nd's neck before yer promise. Faith, and when the Piper plays that game it ain't always that they get up."

The chief gave a cry of dismay as the Irishman coolly arose, returned the revolver to its hiding-place, and threw himself into a chair. Hardy lay without sense or motion. He might very well be dead for all the signs of life that he gave.

"Begorra, Oi belave yez think Oi mane it," said the Piper, after a few moments, in which the chief was busying himself with his captain. "Yez n'aden't be thryin' ter git the drap on me, fur yez didn't git up airly enough in the mornin'. Oi kin pull an' drap yez afore yez kin git ther hammer up, an' the bell cord's over yander forninst ther doour. But he's only squelched loike. L'ave him alone a bit, an' he'll be all roight, an' you an' me talk r'ason. Does yez think Oi'm ther mon ter tackle ther Gilt Edge? Ef I ain't, say so quick, an' Oi'll be goin'!"

"Stop! stay!" exclaimed the chief, noticing a movement that betokened returning consciousness. "You are the man I want. You can go to work at once. Tell me what help you will require and how you will proceed, and you shall not complain of the lukewarmness of my aid. But, first of all, tell me, what is this gang? Who is their leader?"

"Begorra, niver a wan of me knows. It may be he's ther leader—mebbe it's yerself. I'll niver till. An' ef yez knew phat I wor afther doin' yez moight be afther thryin' it yerself. Shore, when the toime comes Oi'll let yez know, an' ye'll do as I sez an' that'll be the ind av it."

"You mean, in other words, to run the Department, and let me play second fiddle," answered the chief, angrily. "I must know who it is that I am trusting, and why you are willing to sell out your pals, before I can go any further."

"Ye'll thrust me on sight an' on seein', an' why Oi'm willin' ter sell out is none ov yer business. Yez bluddy spalpeens, yez ain't fit fur a white man to worruk wid, but it's ther best I kin do. Oi'll let yez know when I wants yer help, an' be hanged to yez. Good-mornin'."

Captain Hardy had called the attention of the chief more fully to himself by gasping several times and then opening his eyes and mouth, very much after the fashion of a dying mackerel.

Now he staggered slowly to his feet and stared around him with lack-luster eyes.

"He's Satan let loose, George. Close in with him at once. If that's the kind of men the gang are you will have to fight fire with fire. Never mind me. I am all right."

The captain was returning rapidly to his senses—and so was the chief. He wheeled to see what new move the little Irishman was up to; but no Irishman was there. He had slipped quietly out of the room.

The chief rushed out and through the corridor

but the disappearance was as inexplicable as it was sudden, since no one had seen such a person leaving the house. Hastily he gave his orders to two men who had promptly appeared at his summons. Then he went back to Captain Hardy, who, by this time, had thoroughly recovered.

"He is gone," groaned the chief, as he entered the room. "What do you make out of him?"

"I make him out to be the best little man that ever stepped on shoe-leather," responded Hardy, ruefully.

"Yes, but what was his object in coming here? What do you make of him?"

"He's a late importation, and I have not a doubt but what he was acquainted with some of the gang in the old country. As likely as not they have not treated him with the cordiality he thinks he deserves, and out of revenge he is thinking of selling them out. Whether this interview will confirm him in his intention or not remains to be seen. I am afraid not, but if it does I should say, employ him. Give him *carte blanche* to act in the matter, but shadow him from the moment you can strike his trail. Evidently he is a dangerous man."

"You have hit my idea exactly. When he announced himself so boldly I had a half-thought that the whole thing was a bit of bravado. I am no nearer to being surer one way or the other. But if I can trap him to sea I will."

And while they were talking a detective came rushing in out of breath.

"The Gilt Edge Gang," he gasped. "They have killed a man in Greenwich street—just tramped the life out of him. From his looks, he must have been well off, and they must have lifted a handsome swag."

The chief and captain Hardy looked at each other.

"Yes," murmured the former, "I must have Paddy the Piper. To-morrow I'll put another advertisement in the paper asking him to go to work on his own terms."

CHAPTER II.

"FRIENDS IN COUNCIL."

PRESTON BLAINE, late major in the Confederate service, had found himself brought face to face with the problem of life in New York City, and was not above using those talents he had at his disposal. He had been bred to no profession, trade or occupation, and had never earned a dollar in his life up to the opening of the war. Into that he plunged with a whole-souled recklessness, and when he came out, none the worse physically for a few scars, he found that every cent of his possessions had gone with "the Lost Cause."

He did not regret, but drifted southward into Mexico, where he saw more service of a slightly irregular character, out of which he got as soon as possible. Then, after more aimless wandering, he stranded in New York, and in default of anything better, caught up note-book and pencil and dashed vigorously into reporting.

He had more success than he had hoped for, since luck favored him at the outset, and after he had obtained a little experience his diligence kept him going. Several times he had been called upon to chronicle the doings of the Gilt Edge Gang, and he was one of the first to suggest that the striking similarity in all these crimes was an evidence that there was a band of men leagued together who were the guilty parties in every case. He it was who interviewed the victim at the hospital, and learned the name by which, in his own mind at least, the organization was called. Without being a monomaniac, Preston Blaine had written and said a great deal on the subject—so much that several of his friends of the quill had given him warning that he might carry his enthusiasm too far.

He laughed at the warning, for he was one of the most fearless men living; and in addition there were very few better able to take care of themselves than this jaunty little Southerner, with the coal-black eyes and flowing hair.

By this time he had got over the preliminary stages of his calling, was able to do good work, and make some money. Moreover, he was enjoying life thoroughly, and was on very good terms with himself.

One afternoon, walking briskly down Broadway, he heard his name called, and looking around, saw a face that was familiar, though it had been years since he last met its owner—General Hector Rawle.

The two clasped hands in an instant.

"Of all men you are the last that I would have thought of meeting," said Blaine, after the first words of greeting had been given.

"I heard you were somewhere in the East—India, I think. When did you get back to this great, universal, Yankee land of ours?"

Blaine laughed as he spoke. At first he had thought of spoiling the Egyptians, now he began to feel as though he was living with the Romans, and standing a pretty fair chance to become a Roman himself. There was not a spark of bitterness in his tone, though a moment later he did look rather curiously at the general, to see what effect his careless words might have. He had known him to be a most thorough hater in his time, and was just a little surprised to see

that he had aroused not a spark of the old-time feeling.

"I'm not sure how much interest I can claim, but I confess I was not half-sorry to get back, after some fifteen years' absence. I took in India to be sure, but I'm last from Egypt. I don't know that I would have left that wonderful country if it had not been for some important matters, involving a large sum of money, that required my presence here. Now that I have come I am doubly glad of it. I don't know how it is that we have not met sooner."

"Any family?" asked the major, airily. "I'm still a bachelor, and likely to remain. Never felt sorry until now. As I haven't a local habitation, or much of a name, I can't invite you around to stop with me in my brown-stone front while you are in the city; but better luck by the next time. Meanwhile, I'd like to see as much of you as possible."

"Thanks, I believe you are just as rattled as you were when the youngest member of my staff. Of course I expect to see a good deal of you now that we have met by chance; and perhaps I can help you on a few squares toward the purchase of that brown-stone front that I can see you have your heart on. As for family—I am a widower, with one child, Regina. When I started on my wanderings I neglected her after a way, leaving her with an aunt, that died. When I heard from her in my wanderings she had found a home and was taking care of herself, aided a good deal by a little legacy from poor Mary. Now, to my surprise she is a woman. You've no idea what a strange revelation it was when I met her."

Again Blaine laughed; his hearty, careless laugh.

"I am always busy, and always at leisure. I have dropped the saber and seized the pen. This minute I am looking for items, and nothing would give me more pleasure than to immortalize my old chief in a two column article. Say. You must have seen something worth telling in the East. If you'll give me the points I'll write you right up. What say you?"

"Hush!" answered the general, hastily, holding up his hand.

"You are a reporter, are you? For heavens sake keep me out of your note-book. I am here half incog., and you can't do me a greater service than by remaining quiet about my presence. But of course you will. I was going to say that, if you have nothing to do, I would be glad to have you come to our rooms and talk over old times. I have quite lost the run of our friends, while no doubt you are posted as to their whereabouts. I want to go over the list before I get totally immersed in business."

"I've followed you often enough, general, for you to know that your wish is a law that I am very happy to obey. Come, I did a fair day's work before dinner, and I've a few hours that I would spend in idling anyway."

Without hesitation Blaine took the general's arm and walked up the street with him.

Major Blaine was not heartless, nor was he devoid of curiosity, that he made no further inquiry in regard to Hector Rawle's family.

The fact was that his acquaintance with the late Mrs. Rawle was of the slightest, and he scarcely remembered at all the child that he had simply had a glimpse of on one or two occasions. He was totally unprepared for the reality of the thing when General Rawle said:

"My daughter, Regina, major; Regina, this is Preston Blaine, formerly of my staff. You have heard his name often enough, no doubt."

"Have I not?" answered a soft, sweet voice, and a young girl of not over nineteen came forward, holding out a slender white hand.

He looked into the face of this girl with surprise, even as he took the hand that was offered him. He was agitated; and so was she, though with more tact to conceal it. Unless he was widely mistaken, he had once drawn her from a Broadway jam, when she was in some little danger, and several times since they had passed each other with that half-recognizing look that means a great deal.

He had thought often enough that he would speak to her again if he dared—and here at last her hand was in his, and she was the daughter of Hector Rawle.

No great resemblance was there, since he was tall and dark, while she was *petite* and dazzling fair. Her hair was a rich chestnut brown, and hung over her shoulders in a heavy mass of curls; her eyes were a changeable blue; while every motion was full of indolent grace.

Probably General Rawle caught the involuntary movement of surprise. He smiled, and said quietly:

"Not very much like me, is she? But she is her mother over again."

"I saw but little of Mrs. Rawle; but I can trace the resemblance," answered Blaine, and he noted a sudden gleam in the blue eyes that told him his response was pleasing.

Then they seated themselves and began anew their conversation, in which Miss Regina now and then joined, though, for the most part, she listened with an eager interest.

After they had hastily compared reminiscences, the general remarked:

"I don't mind telling you, Blaine, in spite of

your profession, something of the nature of the business that has called me here.

"My sister's husband committed suicide not long ago, when he found himself bankrupt through unsuccessful speculations. Unfortunately, he had bankrupted not only himself and his family, but several other families as well, unless research should throw some light on the subject. I sometimes think that it will."

Preston Blaine stroked his long mustache thoughtfully.

"Who was the gentleman that suicided? There have been some strange cases in the last year, and I looked most of them up for the papers. Perhaps I could give you a point or two."

"Alvah Wharton was the name of the poor unfortunate. I say unfortunate advisedly, for I knew him too well to believe that he would be deliberately guilty of anything dishonest."

"Wharton? Why, I know that case like a book. About half a million of missing securities. What is it that you want to find out? You will excuse me for saying it, but it's about as plain as a flag-staff. He went down into Wall street like a lion, and came away like a sheep after the shearing. He had one little flyer left that he thought might give him enough to go on, and when that slumped through and when they called on him for a heap of money to make his margins good, he just blew his brains out. It's a bad story, and if I were you I wouldn't give it any further ventilation. It has been forgotten already, but if you give it a second start, it will float on the surface at least twice as long as it did originally."

General Rawle listened attentively to his younger friend, but it was with the air of one who was not at all convinced.

"That's the outside story, and I don't blame you, Preston, for swallowing it down. But I know something that you do not. Alvah Wharton had made a quarter of a million out of Northern Pacific on the last turn of the deal before the unfortunate occurrence that ended his life; why then should he blow his brains out when he was called on for a paltry little fifty thousand? Besides, he had expected just such a turn under certain contingencies, and was ready for it, expecting to make ultimate profit. The fact is, it is not half a million, but three-quarters of a million dollars that is missing, and it is my work here to find out where it went to."

"And when you find it?"

"I am going to clear Alvah's name no matter who goes under."

"Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars?—that is large money," said Blaine, thoughtfully.

"If I could see any way by which they could have got at it, I would be half-inclined to take your view."

"That is what is to be found," suddenly interposed Miss Regina. "It is going to be, perhaps, the hardest of work; but we will not fail in the end. I am ready to do my share, small though it may be; and I know that you will help us. You can help us, too. You know so many persons and things that we are ignorant of. And you could make so many inquiries, while no one would be suspecting you. Altogether, it has really been quite providential, father happening to meet you in such an unexpected way. We can count on you, can we not?"

"Certainly," responded Major Blaine, bowing low to conceal a smile. "Perhaps I shall find in the course of my investigations that my *betes noir* of the Gilt Edge Gang are concerned in this also."

"The what?"

General Rawle seemed struck by the name.

"The Gilt Edge Gang. Of course I have been laughed at for my opinion, but they seem to be the most remarkable criminals we have had for years. Equal to the Old Man of the Mountain and his assassins."

"Singular," said the general, musingly. "I have heard that name before, or one very much like it, though it was in a different language. The name sounds coarse; but could the organization be of Eastern origin?"

"An idea! To look for Eastern assassins in the Empire City. Instead of the cord they work with the bludgeon; instead of Captain Sleeman, Paddy the Piper is to be their exterminator—assisted, perhaps, by one Preston Blaine."

"And, in the name of wonder, who is Paddy the Piper, and what has he to do with them?"

"Oh, he is a crack-brained Irishman, supposed to have been at one time connected with the mob, but who at present prefers to play the virtuous—for a due reward. He must be a remarkable sort of man, for barehanded he got away with the chief of police and Captain Hardy. They let up when they found they had to, and to-day I think they would sooner take him than the rest of the villains he denounces."

"Whist! How'd yer gab! Paddy the Piper is here to spake fer himself. Gin'ral, darlint, ye're a gintleman, an' wouldn't take a mane advantage av a mon ez wanted to do yez a good tourn. I'm thrustin' av yez both niver to br'athe er worrind whin I tell yez ye're both in danger av yer loives, an' axes yez ter kape off av ther strate-to-night. By to-morrer Oi'll hev it fixed ter take care ov yez; but ter-noight's ther danger."

The three had sprung to their feet at the sound of the strange voice, and the first idea of the general was to pitch the intruder out neck and crop.

It was not any fear that restrained him, but a sudden streak of curiosity such as he had never felt before. The man was sane, sober, and in earnest. What then was the meaning of the intrusion?

"What do you want?" began the general—and before he could utter another word the little ferret-eyed Irishman was gone.

The two men looked strangely at each other, when Hector Rawle had stopped the major from pursuit by a sudden gesture that reminded the younger man of the old times.

"You are right, general, as you always were. That is the man I was just speaking of. If he is honest in his warning, it would be best that we let him go his way unhindered. But why should he bother his head with us, and how did he come to open your doors? Certainly I have never seen him before, and I judge he is equally a stranger to you."

"And if he is not honest we are losing a chance. It is as likely that he wants to keep us out of the road. He could have no knowledge of me, unless he has been mixed up in the very matters I have been talking of. I tell you, Preston, it's a clew. The warning has its meaning, and I am going to take it."

"And I am not. Then we'll have him both ways. I believe there's a deeper game somewhere than they dream of, even at Headquarters. Good-afternoon, general; good-day, Miss Regina. I shall see you both to-morrow. For the present I'm off on the trail."

Without waiting for answer he took his departure; and this time the general did not attempt to stop him, though the major did not guess the reason why.

General Rawle's eyes had by chance fallen upon his daughter, and he had seen that her face was as white as marble.

CHAPTER III.

THE ROW AT THE RAT-TRAP.

THE "Rat-Trap" was just around the corner from respectability and yet it had a more unsavory reputation, even than the Burnt Rag. The stranger who went into it after nine o'clock with a dollar in his pocket carried his life in his hand, and was lucky if he came out again robbed only of his dollar.

It was near midnight when the proprietor, old Silas Kettles—Copper Sile, as the boys generally called him—cast his one bleared eye on a face that was new to him, though its presence had evidently been unobserved by his regular lambs.

"Hello, my downy cove, who be you, an' w'ot does yer want?"

Copper Sile spoke sharply, and moved toward the other end of his bar.

"What do you s'pose I want, you old rum-soaked slubber-degullion? I want about a yard of white velvet, neat and strong. Spud it out, and there's the color of my mopus. I'm a good little man, able all 'round to take care of myself, so just whack up the fire-water while I take a soaker to the man that has two chances to dance."

The tones were so remarkably free and easy that he did not seem to be spoiling for a fight; but for a stranger to come in alone and attempt to drink alone, was generally a signal for a disturbance at the Rat Trap, and just then Copper Sile had his reasons for not wanting any trouble in the house.

"A leary cove like you orter be fly to ther time ov day we keeps down here. It ain't my fault; but there's a gang ez lays 'round these here s'loons ez goes through likely lookin' strangers like whiz. They sail in an' double-bank 'em afore they know what's hurt 'em. Thar's yer gin, but ef yer's ez downy a cove ez I thinks yer be you'll jest pad ther hoof to a better climate."

"Oh, I'm all right," responded the man, coolly, as he drained off the vile decoction. "I don't mind a little fun myself, and I don't mind tacking about half a dozen of your bruisers; though, if they're the right stripe, they'll hardly tackle me."

The stranger looked to be a moderate-sized man, through the rough light ulster, suitable to the fall weather, concealed his form. He wore a close-fitting cap on his head, drawn well down over his eyes, and his hair, or what was visible, was cropped short and was parted behind. The rather small hand that raised the glass of liquor, was white and shapely.

When he had swallowed the poison, the man looked in a satisfied way at Copper Sile that caused that worthy to stare suspiciously in return. A man that acted after this fashion was generally either a fly cop in disguise, or some one on the cross. Which, it was important for Sile to know.

Unfortunately, as it seemed, the few minutes' start had expired, and the loungers, who happened to be few, came forward to take a hand.

"Say, cully, who'n blazes be you?" asked Big Mike, a burly ruffian, in a red shirt and cordu-

roy pantaloons, edging himself in at the bar, and facing the smaller man with a scowl on his countenance.

"I don't know, my friend, as it's any of your business; but my handle is nothing to be ed of. Knock-'em-down and Pick-'em-up is the gentle little name my friends call me to supper by, and if you don't like it just let me alone."

And the smile on the man's face was evidence that he did not believe, after that challenge, he would be left alone.

The stranger had taken his position in the angle formed by the bar and the wall, a place that had its disadvantage as well as its advantage. While he could not be flanked or approached from behind, he had no visible line of retreat; and the contracted quarters could not help but hamper his movements.

The gang saw this and acted accordingly, spreading out in solid line in front of him.

Just then Copper Sile, who had come out from his place, laid a hand on Big Mike's arm, and whispered in his ear:

"Go slow, Mikey; it's a plant, sure as a gun, an' the coppers are somewhere outside, waiting to pull the place."

"You think," interrupted the stranger, who seemed to have overheard the whisper. "How good of you? But if you don't want to have a muss in here, maybe these gentlemen would come outside. As they are half a dozen to one, and more in the background, they can hardly be afraid."

"Afraid!" gasped Big Mike, angrily shaking the hand from his arm.

"Let me go, Sile. I'll mash him ef they run me in ther next minute. There's nothin' chalked up on ther books ag'in' me now."

"Don't be too sure of that, Michael, my boy. You've got a long score to settle. And as to mashing, you can't mash one side of me."

For a large man, Big Mike was remarkably quick on his feet; and he could use his hands in a way that was not to be despised. If he had not been thrown off his guard by the suggestion of Kettles, he might have pursued a different course; but thinking it possible that the object of the stranger was to create a disturbance which would give the alarm to a waiting squad outside, he meant to have no noise at all. Without even a warning growl, he slung his fist straight at the head so provokingly ready.

It was ready, but not for the knuckles of Big Mike. It dodged out of the way at the last moment, and then came a return, straight as a die and heavy as a trip-hammer that sent the ruffian stumbling back, to finally sprawl upon the floor with a tremendous shock.

In an instant all idea of caution was lost, and the rest of the mob made a solid rush at the little man, who just as instantly produced a revolver from his breast and fired with amazing rapidity. Then there was an answering racket, the lights suddenly went out, and in the darkness it seemed as though pandemonium with all its noises had broken loose.

Copper Sile had turned off the gas, and now raised his voice in an effort to quiet the affray; but to no purpose.

While he shouted the steady tramp of half a dozen strong men was heard, and into the room rushed a detachment of policemen, a black-eyed man, with heavy mustache and plain clothes—none other than the ubiquitous Major Preston Blaine—at their head.

One of the policemen threw open the slide of a bull's-eye, and turned the light upon the mixed knot of men, struggling and striking and yelling.

"What's this?" exclaimed the major, and he looked down sharply at Big Mike, who had fallen clear of the crush.

The circle of light only rested on the face a moment, but that was long enough for Blaine to see that it was not that of the man he was after, and he turned his attention to the writhing group further on, which suddenly became disentangled, as Captain Hardy and three or four of his aids dashed vigorously at it.

A set of very ordinary ruffians were they, who stood blinking and puffing, without an offer toward resistance or escape.

"Here, Kettles!" said Hardy, sharply, his keen eyes glancing around to see that no one made his escape.

"What is the meaning of this riot? I'll have to take in this gang, and you'll hear from us in the morning. If you can't keep a quieter house, it's time you were closed up and the business put into the hands of some one that can. I suppose there will always be a saloon here; but there's no reason why it shouldn't be a decent one. What's this about? Show up a little more light here; while I see what kind of a haul I've made."

Copper Sile had already lit the burner behind his bar, and some one else was applying a lighted match to those further out in the room, from which the gas was beginning to issue in a sickening stream. Captain Hardy's questions brought the proprietor to the front.

"See, now, captain, you wouldn't be too hard on a man that's trying his best to live a peaceable life, and make an honest living. It was only some of the boys having a little fun among

themselves. It was rough on the place, though, so I just turned the light out to quiet them down, and if you had gone on, by this time they would have been as peaceable as lambs."

"Here's one man that's peaceable, anyhow; but he's dead. It's the slugger they call Big Mike, if I am not mistaken. When bullets fly, some one goes under."

"He's only stunned a bit, captain. Just before I turned the light, some one tripped him, and he fell against the bar. His skull is a thick one, and I'll bet money it's solid yet."

Sure enough, while Hardy was looking at him, Big Mike gasped and began to revive, even while Kettles was pointing out the mark of the bruise on his forehead.

"That's all right," said Hardy, suddenly. "Where's the little Irishman?"

"What little Irishman do you mean?"

There was no question about the genuineness of the surprise in Copper Sile's tone.

"The little Irishman in an ulster and cap. You needn't try to play off. He came in at this door, and he didn't go out at that. Have you got him behind the bar, or where have you hidden him away?"

Hardy was too impatient to mince matters, too shrewd to give the saloon-keeper further time to cover the retreat of the wanted man. His men had their clubs ready, though they found no excuse for using them, since the late belligerents were as peaceable as so many kittens; and the captain rummaged around to find the means of exit.

Old Sile watched with a puzzled look. He had expected closer questioning about the fracas which he had intended as much as possible to ignore, and was surprised to find that, unless appearances are tremendously deceiving, the man whom he had taken to be a police spy, was in reality a fugitive.

Meantime, the prisoners said nothing, or next to nothing.

It was the wisest course, all things considered. In due time Copper Sile would no doubt give them a lead, which they could thus follow without risk of contradicting themselves. As they were not in the saloon business, they were not much softened toward the missing and wanted man by the knowledge that he was a fellow-criminal, and they only kept silent with regard to him because Copper Sile did.

"See here, captain," said Kettles at length, "you always found me straight, and I'm giving it to you that way now. There's been no little Irishman in here to-night, unless you can find him in that lot yonder. I'll swear to it straight along."

"That filly won't trot, Copper. We followed him right here. We've been hunting for his trail all day, and when we got on it by the luckiest sort of a chance, you don't suppose we would have lost it again? I tell you you have him hidden somewhere, and it will go badly with you if you don't show him up. There were four pair of eyes saw him go in here, and if these confounded lazy bones of mine had been around on time we would have had him safely enough."

"Who yer talkin' about? He must be a big gun."

"Big enough to make it worth while to the tune of a couple of hundred for some one to hand him over. You needn't play innocent. If there is any one in New York that would know Paddy the Piper by sight, you ought to be the man."

There was now no mistaking the look upon Copper Sile's face.

"See here, captain, it ain't no use fer you to come in here and talk Dutch to me. There ain't no such man been in here; an' if ther' had, I wouldn't know him by that name. You kin search the house if you choose. I ain't nothin' to do with ther up-stairs, an' if yer want to git thar, you'll have ter go 'round to ther other end of the shebang; but here's ther cellar, an' locked it is, from this side, as it orter be."

From the moment the police had entered, it was certain that no one had left the saloon—and with a watch at either mode of egress to the street, it was a puzzle how any one could, unless by means of the cellar, have passed out even before their entrance.

"We'll take a look down there anyhow. There's such a thing as turning the key from the other side with a pair of nippers, and I've known something more to be in a cellar than barrels."

Copper Sile looked as though he did not understand the insinuation and threw open the door with an untroubled air. At Hardy's request he even produced a lantern and led the way, followed by the captain, two of his men, and Preston Blaine.

The search in the cellar was thorough, but revealed nothing. The walls appeared to be solid, without any possible opening. After ten minutes spent in rummaging the captain gave it up for the time being, and drew off his forces. Big Mike had come to his senses; but he could give no more lucid account of the row than that furnished by Kettles, and on being questioned stuck to it that Paddy the Piper was a myth. As no one had any complaint to make, and none of the gang happened to be specially wanted, Hardy turned the lot up.

As they left the saloon Blaine expressed his dissatisfaction in a low tone.

"I don't know," responded Hardy. "You have done a wonderfully good piece of work for an amateur—more than the chief has been able to do in pretty near a month of Sundays if you made no mistake."

"How so? We have nothing to show for it."

"All the same it looks as though we had trailed the gang right in to their headquarters. From this time on there will be a special watch on Copper Sile's. The old thief always was supposed to be bad enough; now I'll lay four to one that all this devilry is hatched right here. The thing is to get proof. That we'll have, though, in time. Things are working."

Captain Hardy was in a very good humor in spite of the temporary defeat; and Blaine seemed to be better satisfied, though he had been disgusted enough at first.

"But how do you think he got away?"

That was the point that troubled the major. He had not seen as many mysterious disappearances as the more experienced police captain.

"I don't suppose he got away at all. He is there yet—somewhere. The thing will be to spot him when he leaves. He won't stay there cooped up forever, and then we will have him. I wonder if it wouldn't be advisable to run the risk, and search the whole building!"

The captain considered the subject for a moment, and then evidently made up his mind to the negative. He ostentatiously drew together the little force that had been concentrated at Copper Sile's, and all marched in close order.

The hour was late, but the streets were by no means deserted, and the intelligence that something was going on at Sile's had spread abroad. Quite a number of men were watching the house from the outside, some of whom slunk away into the darkness at the appearance of the police force, while others boldly stood their ground.

"Let me give you one little piece of advice," continued Hardy.

"You got yourself entirely too far up to the front to-night. There was more than one pair of eyes on you, and if you are wise you will keep out of this section of the country after dark. If you don't, the Gilt-Edgers will be going for you without much regard to the state of your pockets. After to-night you will be marked by men who would cut your throat for a dime and steal a coffin to throw you in. I don't exactly see why you take an interest in the matter, anyway."

Major Blaine shrugged his shoulders and made no immediate answer. He was following with his eyes a feminine figure that had just flitted across the street a little ahead of them, and scarcely heard what was said. He was thinking:

"It's the most ridiculous nonsense, of course, but as sure as that is a woman, she puts me in mind of General Rawle's daughter. It's not what I see, either; but just an uncertain, uncanny feeling—that unfortunately never comes over me without its meaning."

Muttering something to Captain Hardy, he wheeled and strolled very slowly back, keeping his eye on the gliding figure that crossed the street once more, and finally darted into the doorway of the very building in which the Rat Trap was located. As the woman entered she gave one backward glance, that revealed her face full in the glare of the neighboring lamp; and without a doubt it was Regina Rawle.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN IN HIDING.

THE young woman who entered the dwelling adjacent to the Rat Trap certainly knew the way strangely well to be a daughter of General Hector Rawle.

She had let herself in with a night-key, and now sprang nimbly up the stairs, though the hallway was shrouded in utter darkness. Up, up, she went, for two flights, making the turns on the landings without the least hesitation, but at the top of the last flight she halted suddenly and pressed heavily on the wall, standing close to the inner edge of the last stair.

If Preston Blaine could have been present, and there had been light enough for him to see by, he would have been more than ever surprised.

The girl began to sink downward, until her head disappeared from view. Then the section of the stairs that had sunk beneath her like a trap-door returned noiselessly to its place, and the hall was as vacant and silent as though no living creature had ever passed through it.

The fact was that at the instant her head would clear the level of the landing she took one short side step.

That moment the trap moved upward to its place, while the one upon which she now took her station began to carry her still further downward. She was in the narrow shaft of a hidden elevator, that led on down and down.

Without the least nervousness, she waited, although, if at all acquainted with the mysteries of the place, she must have been aware of the distance of the dangerous descent.

There was no mistake or accident, and slackening its pace, the elevator came smoothly to a final halt.

Then she put up her hand and touched a button upon which it naturally fell.

She was in a narrow box-like shaft, with but standing-room.

As the button was pressed a bell jingled faintly. Then one side of the box opened outward, and the occupant stepped lightly into a small room that was lighted by a lamp on a table, at which a young man was writing.

He looked up.

"So it's you, is it? I suspected as much when I heard you strike the landing above. What in the name of wonder brings you down here into my den? You have done a foolish thing, for it may be easier to get in than to get out."

"What has been going on, Howard? Had that procession that I met outside, around the corner, anything to do with you?"

"A great deal to do with me, since it was gotten up entirely in my honor. The fact is, that reporter is a good deal sharper than I took him to be—a deal sharper than was good for my health. He took my trail right in the crowd, passed the word to a friend of his on the fence, and piped me down."

"And how did you elude them? You certainly did not venture to come in with their eyes on you?"

"And certainly I can't keep a hotel. Oh, yes, of course I did. Much difference it would make to them so I had the start of a flight of stairs. Don't look so horrified. I am not going to give myself away any further, if I can help it."

"But if you have done that already? What was the use?"

"Don't be so suddenly downhearted. I thought you were too brave and had too much confidence in me for that; I had to come here to-night, and there was only one way out of the mix—"

"Which you had brought on yourself by your own imprudence."

"And never mind that. You will see, in the end, whether I have been wise or not. But, as I couldn't come in the front way, I took the back. I tried the road through the saloon, and it worked like a charm."

"What! before them all? If they suspect your secret, you are as good as lost."

"Not exactly before them. There was where the fun came in. I just walked in and kicked up the prettiest little row ever started in the Rat Trap—and that's the place where they invented free fights; and I got a chance to send one in hot on Big Mike, whom I have been itching to lay out any time for the last three months and to-night more than ever. Then the row waxed hotter. Sile turned out the light, as I knew he would, and just as my friends, the policemen bounced in, I dove out into the elevator, and went up skyward. In three minutes more they might have torn that side of the house down and not found out anything much."

"But this man, Kettles. Surely, he will suspect something and examine. He may discover more than is pleasant."

"That is the joke of it. Unless I'm further from the truth than I generally wander, he suspects I was one of the gang, and that I went down into his cellar. A blessed lively time he'll have looking for the lost brother."

"I suppose you were careful enough, after all, to look out for your own safety; but you may have complicated matters for me. After such a performance it is pretty sure that the house will be watched so closely that even a mouse couldn't get out without being seen. You don't understand the terrible risk I run. You can stay here till they are tired."

"In case they set up such a game, we can try the old dodge. Regina will be sick in bed, and Lizzie will have to go home to her aunt, and we will find our way in at our leisure. Time enough to consider that by and by. You know the drain is always open. Now, tell me, what is the latest report from headquarters?"

"Nothing tangible," answered the girl, moodily.

"I sometimes think it is all a grand mistake—that we are on the wrong tack altogether."

"You are not giving up, are you? I tell you we are not mistaken—though we may not even guess what is to be the end. It may be to save a fortune; it may be to earn a dear revenge. If I know anything of you, you may be careless of the one; but if there is occasion for it, for the other you would care a great deal."

"Not so much, perhaps, as you think. I care for you, Howard. Your safety and your wishes have been my law."

"And some of these days, when you see a man for whom you can care more than you now do for me, you will throw me over without the least hesitation. You can't be forever the only exception in the sex; and when the time comes, I shall not blame you."

The girl's answer was even more passionate than his speech was bitter.

"Oh, no, no! You are all that I have, all that I can have—at least so long as you need me. If the time ever does come that you do not, what difference will it make, since I am beginning to doubt, if not to hate, all the rest of mankind."

"Well, I must believe you," responded the young man, his tone changing to a reckless one. "I sometimes lose heart myself, and don't care.

If it was not for you, and that I've kept up the fight so long, I'd be tempted to give myself away."

"Don't talk so; please don't. I doubt if you mean it, and yet you are so reckless that I shudder whenever I think of you. Why should you have run the risk of the last few days? Why not have gone to work as a prudent man would?"

"Why, indeed? Because when a man has been hunted from pillar to post, and has the arm of the gallows stretching over him for so long, all ordinary ways grow tame. Is life worth living when one has such a den as this to retire to?"

"Then why not have gone away long ago? If you could evade pursuit here, where you are wanted, and were safe in your disguises, who would have found you out where you were a perfect stranger?"

"There is where you mistake. It is boldness alone that wins. As a stranger I would be known and marked in any other place in the world. No, I have my mission here, and whether I finish it or not here I remain to the end. Now what have you to report? Did he recognize me this afternoon?"

"Not that I could see—not, at least, as yourself. He seemed frightened, so far as so cool a hand could be frightened. Yet whether Paddy the Piper—true or false—is known to him is more than I could make out. Since then, however, he acts more than ever like a hunted or a hiding man."

"And he is both. Of that I have secured evidence enough."

"Do you think the police are on his track?"

"It is hard to say. Three men have their eye on him, yet seem in doubt. One or the other follows him warily. They do their work 'most too well to be of the police force. It looks more like revenge. I am watching him now to see that he is not found some morning with a knife in his back or his head all broken in."

"Oh! that *must* not be; at least until we know better."

"Of course not; never fear. For the present I am his guardian angel. And I meant every word of my warning this afternoon. I have an idea that he will take it. If he does not he wants to keep in the front streets, and be careful at that. The word has gone out to slug him."

"How do you know that? I can hardly believe that he is in any particular danger."

"I wish I *could* explain; but that is as far as I could get by dint of close listening. Big Mike let fall a word or two that put me on the scent."

"Then he is one of the gang you are trying to exterminate?"

"Perhaps. If he hasn't some means of knowing of the gang's doings. If he were not such an outlandish ruffian I would suspect him of pulling at two ends of a string."

"Well, however that may be he has disregarded your warnings. Had he not done so I could hardly have met you here."

"Yet he does not seem to have taken that young Blaine into his confidence very much, after all—and he is a man to be trusted. He never met me before the encounter of to-day, but I have heard of him. He would make a firm friend or a dangerous foe."

"So I believe," interposed Regina. "And I have met him before—though not to know who he was. He did me a favor once, in one of my lonely wanderings in search of you. He did not mention it, but I saw to-day, that he remembered it. I am sure there is nothing of fraud about him."

Howard gave a short laugh.

"So he is your unknown knight: I remember something about it. I would sooner it had been for some one else—yet it may be that he could be enlisted on the other side if his eyes could be opened. In that case an interest in you would not be the worst thing in the world. You are aware that you are not postively hideous?"

"Oh Howard!"

"Don't exclaim! He is honest and earnest; two qualities that are scarce in this world."

"And how then do you account for your suspicions? Have we been guilty of a horrible wrong? It is that which has been troubling me all the afternoon and which drove me here to-night. If he is honest how do our strong suspicions weigh against his certainty?"

"He has no certainty; he is only in the web, as you were. Some day he will find out his mistake as you found it, and I think it will have to be your duty to show it to him before it is too late."

"Mine! What proof have I to give him against the evidence of his own senses—and mine, so far as they have had chance to be used?"

"Foolish girl! And is it for this you have come here to-night?"

"Yes, I own I have been staggered. The more I think and reason the more deeply I feel I have sinned. What shall I do?"

"Regina, I could settle your doubts in a day if I dared act in sunlight and openly. As it is I must still burrow and grub for a season, though I hope the time will come when I can

throw off my mask. This house has its double, perhaps triple set of secrets. I arranged my own hiding-places when pursuit was warm. By chance some one has arranged another den at the house next door. I have my eye on it, while its frequenters have never suspected my presence. From here I can reach Copper Sile's, and from Copper Sile's I can reach them. I am after the men that meet there, but I do not understand them yet. I know that a woman held an interview with the same Big Mike I struck down to-night and put him on the track of the general. It was against him that I warned. From them I know that we are right. Other proofs we will have in due time. Now we must be moving. After all I see no great risk in your leaving the way you came. I will risk trying the route I have just spoken of, and if the way is clear I will join you at the next corner. It is a case now for nerve, and if there is any suspicion of you we will manage to make good our retreat."

"Very well, if it must be so," she responded, and after a few words of warning on either side, she stepped into the elevator, which, under Howard's manipulation, began to ascend.

CHAPTER V.

MADAM VELVET.

POLICEMAN McCULLIGAN had noted nothing suspicious, but just as he turned at the end of his beat he saw, at a little distance, something that attracted his attention.

He gave it a second glance, and then thought it worth his while to investigate further.

To his surprise he found the body of a man lying where he could have sworn, a minute ago, there was nothing.

The person, whoever he might be, was tall, well-dressed, and had the general appearance of a gentleman, but he was certainly not very likely to give any account of himself for some time at least, if at all. Some one had dealt him a smashing blow, and he was perfectly unconscious.

"Faith, an' it's odd where he came from," thought McCulligan. "First, I didn't see him, and thin I did—an' that's all ther wor av it. Ef I hadn't been a bit airy here so as I could git back ter watch that airy, it's loike as not they'd a-thramped on him; but the bluddy spalpeens must av seen me comin' an' lit out. Whist! It's the owld complaint. Tin cints ag'in' the Astor House it's the Gilt Edge Gang!"

While he communed with himself McCulligan was bending over the insensible man, feeling his heart and examining into the nature of his injuries.

"Sure, it's a fracure at the bist, an' his pockets are empty as ther kin be wid nothin' in 'em. It's to ther hospital he'll hev to go, an' the sooner he's there the better."

He raised up and was about to rap for assistance, when a gentleman who had approached the spot at a brisk walk suddenly halted.

"What's the matter here? Dead, or drunk?"

"It's more nor half-dead he is, an' not a bit av whisky in the case. Somebody hit him a whack, an' cl'aned out his pockets ontirely."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the stranger, who had bent over to examine for himself.

"It is General Rawle. Here! Support him for a moment. There's a hack around the corner, and I'll have it here in a jiffy. Better get him away before he comes to his senses, or he can't move for a week. Wait. I'll be there."

Without stopping for an answer the man flew away, and McCulligan could hear him in the distance, calling to the hack-driver.

He had not been gone for a minute when he came running back again, the hack following closely.

"Help me in with him, quick. There's not a minute to lose. Softly, now."

"Howld on a bit, will yez? It's all roight, I guess; but w'u'd yez give me yer name?"

"Here's my card, and if anything further is needed in the matter, let me know at once. You need not be afraid that we will drop this outrage here. The men that did this will play checkers with their noses for it. Drive on!"

Policeman McCulligan was so busily occupied in considering the possibilities of the bill that was thrust into his hand along with the card, that he did not think of interfering further until it was too late. The hack rolled away almost noiselessly, leaving him standing there, with a bit of pasteboard and a ten-dollar bill to remind him that it was not all a dream.

The hack had vanished in the darkness, while McCulligan was naturally drawn the other way, to the lamp-post that was not far off. When he had investigated his *douceur*, and satisfied himself as to its amount, he scratched his head and peered away in the direction in which he thought he ought to hear the roll of retreating wheels.

"Ef it warn't fur ther tin-spot I'd think it wor a drame. Sure, an' it's loike there'll be trouble about this. What will I be afther sayin'? Supposin' ther foine jontleman wor wan av ther Gilt Edge Gang himsilf. I'll jist put ther tenner in me pocket, an' kape me mouth shut about the whole affair."

And Policeman McCulligan, having come to

this wise conclusion, sauntered off on the side street in search of the area that he thought needed watching.

The hack meantime had been driven as rapidly as was prudent, and the driver evidently required no further directions, for not once did he confer with his fare inside.

For Good Samaritans they were certainly in no hurry about finding a physician or a resting-place, since the driver went in a circuitous way, as if to leave a trail that could not well be followed up, while the friend, who had so readily recognized the general, allowed him to proceed unquestioned.

The result was that in fifteen minutes the hack was on quite the other side of the city.

Approaching a corner the speed of the horses was moderated to a slow walk, and then the vehicle wheeled suddenly as a man lounging under the shade of a lamp-post raised his arm with an almost imperceptible sign. After going a few yards the carriage wheeled again, and this time it had very nearly reached its journey's end, since it almost immediately disappeared, through a narrow gateway.

The gates closed behind it, the lounge on the corner moved away, and no sign was left to show in what direction to look for the vanished vehicle.

Meantime the hack had pulled up under an archway.

The driver, leaping down, threw open the door and the compassionate gentleman sprang out.

"Ring the bell," said the latter. "We will need help. The man is hit to keep, and if we don't do something for him quick we'll have a croaker on our hands."

The driver took a side step or two and placed his hand against the wall.

Almost instantly another man stood by the side of the carriage. It was so dark that only a dim outline of his form could be seen, and he appeared to have stepped right out of the solid wall.

"He is here," growled the driver, "but I won't swear whether he's dead or alive. Help him in while I get out of this. I'll get nabbed on one of these lays yet and be hanged to 'em. I generally take 'em out; it'll be bad luck to begin bringin' 'em in. Rustle around, can't ye?"

The surly question was entirely unnecessary. The two men seemed to know their work, from the start. Before the words were fairly uttered the body was lifted from the carriage, there was a slight noise of shuffling feet, followed by a low click. Then the driver was alone, while the captors, or whatever they might be, and their burden were within the building.

The men were at home in the darkness.

Without a word they went on, their slippered feet making no sound on the floor of the narrow passageway. Along the secret corridor they passed, and down a flight of stairs, at the foot of which a door opened, and at last a faint glimmer of light appeared, shining through an open doorway.

The journey was nearly at an end. A few more steps, and they deposited the still motionless body upon a lounge, and then turning, made a low bow to the only other occupant of the room, who stepped steadily forward, with a face that expressed neither surprise or regret, though that face was a lovely one to look at for it belonged to a most beautiful woman.

"You have brought him; it is well," she said, in clear, flute-like tones, slightly inclining her head. "Is he living or dead?"

"Living," responded the one who had come in the hack. "He has had a terrible blow, however, and there is concussion of the brain, if not a fracture of the skull. He may die."

"Satan guards his own too well for that. For the present nothing can be done. When he awakes to consciousness perhaps I will need your assistance. All things are arranged, and you can retire."

If the voice was clear it was also cold. The men listened, bowed low and backed out from her presence, leaving her alone with the man in the stupor.

She stood, with her arms folded, looking downward. A curling smile played around her full, red lips, and there was a glitter in her black eyes. Her magnificent arms, bare to the very shoulders, were folded on her breast, gleaming white against the black of the velvet in which she was clad; and her exquisitely-molded form, whose swelling lines were revealed by the perfectly-fitting costume that she wore seemed to tower above the luckless sufferer.

"I think, Edgar Raven, I could kill you where you lie," dropped from her lips. "If I do not it will be no mercy of mine. Poor reward it would be to lose you now. Oh, you were mad to put yourself in the way of falling into my hands; mad to come here where I am a power, when I would have given up all to track you across the seas and strike, had I but known that you still lived. Die? No, you shall not die—not now, at least. Your life is very dear to me. I will nourish it, oh, so tenderly, that you may wake to consciousness, and know how terrible a thing is a woman's hate."

It seemed as though the man must feel the

fierce flame from her eyes. Certainly he stirred; perhaps he gave a faint moan.

The responsive smile came quickly to the woman's face, her eyes sparkled more brightly, and she raised her little, clinched hand, as if to strike him where he lay. Hate could show itself no more.

And then—a finger was laid lightly upon her bare shoulder.

No door had she heard open, or footstep approach, but, as she turned, three strange figures ranged themselves in line, with hands outstretched; and the nearest, he who had touched her shoulder with his finger, bowed low, as he murmured:

"Pardon, but the sahib is ours."

There was no mistaking the foreign tone, the straight black hair, the bronzed faces, the strange garb. The three men who had penetrated into this strange retreat were not her comrades or allies; they were Hindoos, and they claimed her captive.

It was only for an instant that the woman's self-possession left her; though even in that moment she neither flinched or uttered a cry. With a quick motion her hand flew into her breast.

"You villains! you have surprised our secrets. You must die!"

Her hand had closed upon the hilt of a ready revolver.

If she was quick so were the intruders. With a snap, a rope settled over her shoulders; she was helpless to act with that noose drawing tighter and tighter around her arms. When she would have cried out a gag was thrust in her mouth. Yet all the time it was evident that no evil was intended her. The hands that knotted the restraining cord touched her so lightly that she could scarcely feel their presence.

Though the lamp suddenly went out, and she was thrust backward against the wall, not another sound was uttered, and she knew not when the three left, or if they took with them the prisoner to secure whom she had gone to so much trouble. She could only feel their absence, and guess that the huge bolts that secured the door had been turned behind them. She was a prisoner in her own den, and in more danger than she yet supposed.

CHAPTER VI.

MAJOR BLAINE'S STRANGE ADVENTURE.

PRESTON BLAINE was dumfounded at the glimpse of the face of the girl he saw disappearing in the entry of the house whose further corner was occupied by the Rat Trap. His senses had never played him any tricks to speak of, and at first he did not believe that they had done so now. He stared like one possessed.

But after a little he began to believe that he was mistaken.

He knew just where to look for the men who had been stationed to watch the block, and he hastily sketched his programme.

"I will have them watch whether she comes out; and I'll go and beat up the general's quarters. I have certainly learned enough to-night to make it worth his while to listen to me.

To think thus was to act.

In a very few moments he was hurrying away from the spot bent on finding out immediately the falsity of his ridiculous suspicions.

Of course it was a delicate matter, and one harder to gracefully explore than he had thought of in the first burst of his enthusiasm.

It was, however, too late, now, to back out; and he went ahead, a little puzzled how to proceed, or what excuse to give for the questions he saw he might have to ask.

It was with some hesitation that he inquired at the office if it was possible that General Rawle had not yet retired.

"Why, major,"—the clerk seemed to know him, though the face was unfamiliar to Blaine—"the general has not come in yet—unless he has just slipped up-stairs. It was only a few moments ago that Miss Rawle was making inquiry about him. He's not generally a late bird, either."

The major was surprised, and at the same time uneasy.

He had understood Hector Rawle to say that he would remain at home that evening, and he wondered what could have induced him to break that resolution. At any rate it gave him a chance to see Miss Regina, if he any longer doubted that he had been the victim of an optical illusion.

He considered a moment.

He was almost if not quite convinced; and yet without being able to explain why, he knew that it would be more satisfactory to at least obtain a glimpse of the young lady. Besides that, there was the least possibility that he might be of some service to her.

He scribbled a few words on a card, stating that he had called to see the general, and understanding that she was uneasy about him, wished to know if he could be of any service.

He sent up the card by one of the hall-boys, and did not have very long to wait.

Miss Rawle expressed a desire to see him for a moment, if it was not too much trouble for him to step up to their parlor.

He was satisfied now; but of course it was too

late for him to draw back. He went up, wondering what excuse he could give to Miss Regina for his singularly timed visit, and was ushered into the dimly-lighted room.

"I am so glad you happened along," said Regina.

Her tone, however, was much colder than her words. Was she less cordial, or only in trouble?

"Father went out for an hour or two and has not yet returned. Do you think anything can have happened to him?"

"Hardly," answered the major, with what was intended to be a reassuring smile. "I suppose he has met some friends and they are taking refreshments after the theater. If they fairly get to work on old time reminiscences you can't count on when they will break up."

"That is possible—I had not thought of it. The fact is, I have not yet gotten over the mysterious thing that happened here this afternoon, and I would have been better pleased if he had heeded the warning, even though it might have come from an enemy. I cannot understand it."

"I would not give a second thought to that. I have no doubt but that the scene was planned for effect. The Irishman seems determined to attract attention to himself; and he is going about it in a way that will succeed. They have half the reserve force of a precinct watching for him now, where he has dodged into what seems to be his kennel."

"But will they find him, think you?"

"That is a conundrum I wouldn't attempt to answer. It is to be hoped so, though, after all, if he was in earnest, they are hardly giving him fair play. I don't pretend to fathom the chief's meaning, and it is possible that he is only making the chase seemingly hot to throw others off their guard."

"But who is he? What is he? How did he come to be here, and for what object?"

"I cannot tell you, except that he is believed to be a thief and murderer, who wishes to sell out other thieves and murderers. It is possible—even likely—that he had something to do with the matter we were talking of, which your father has determined to investigate. In that case perhaps he would have shown something of his hand if he had found the general alone. One thing, though, is very certain—he is a bold rascal and knows no fear."

"I am sure that you are right, and I am obliged for the interest that you have taken in our unfortunate affairs. You have reassured me, and I doubt not but that father will be in soon, to laugh at my fears. I hope he will come, for though I am not much given to nervousness, I have fretted myself ill, and I doubt if I will be able to raise my head to-morrow. If you wish to see him, and can find time to call in the morning, you will no doubt find him at home, and learn the truth of my words in regard to myself."

The nervous little laugh that followed affected the major unpleasantly. He had an idea that it was time for him to be leaving, and without much more delay, he bowed himself out.

He was more interested than he knew in Regina Rawle, but he had no desire to see her in a hysterical mood, as she would be if they kept up their conversation in regard to the mystery which the general was bent upon unraveling.

The missing man had not yet returned when the major inquired again down-stairs, and in his own mind Blaine was becoming a little uneasy.

Under ordinary circumstances he would not have been surprised at finding the general out, away after midnight; but, after the warning of the afternoon and the assurance that he did not intend to be out late that evening, the major was of the opinion that this unexplained absence meant something. Yet it seemed ridiculous for him to be troubling himself about a man older than himself, both in years and experience, who had scrambled through every nook and corner of the world without ever failing to take the best of care of himself.

Anyhow it was time for the major to be seeking his bed if he expected to be ready for his work in the morning. As he had lost interest in the woman he had left near the Rat Trap, and did not know of anything he could do for General Rawle, he determined to seek his own quarters.

He left the hotel and walked thoughtfully away. He had a couple of squares to go before he could take the cars, and as he went along he was pondering over the events of the past twenty-four hours. His ears and eyes were open for anything that might be near him, so that he was not likely to be taken by surprise.

At the same time he was not taking such strict account of his surroundings as he would otherwise naturally have done. It was more by chance than any watchfulness of his own that his eyes fell upon two forms that were flitting by him on the opposite side of the street.

At the sight he started and halted, looking back over his shoulder.

Then he gave a short laugh.

"I swear I must be going crazy to-night. Every feminine I see puts me in mind of Regina. Is she so wonderful that she embraces all woman-

kind? That is the second time I have been fooled; for I could have sworn again that that was she. If I had been drinking lately I would think it was jim-jams. Of course I know better now. The very idea is preposterous."

He proceeded resolutely on, more than half-ashamed of himself. Had he taken as much care to verify this suspicion as he had the other he might have found something to wonder at rather than to smile.

The lady finally disappeared through a rear entrance to the hotel that Preston Blaine had so lately left, while her escort then hurried away in a direction opposite to the one taken by the major.

Preston went on across town and finally stood on a corner, waiting for a down-town car.

As the hour was late his wait was naturally a long one, and he at last turned to the left and strolled slowly on.

As he neared the next cross street he heard the rumble of a car coming toward him.

And then, just as the car reached the corner, a carriage drawn by two horses, at a frantic speed, rushed upon it.

The horses shied; but it was too late.

There was a sickening crash, the wheels on the off side went grinding into the rear platform and then the carriage was a wreck, while the horses, that had evidently been running away, tore on, and were lost in the darkness.

At the instant of the collision there was a shrill scream from the carriage.

Blaine saw that the catastrophe must happen, and instinctively rushed forward to assist, for he felt sure that harm would come to those inside. The two or three occupants of the car were every whit as much frightened, and made their exit by the front platform in remarkably quick time, so that the major was no longer alone.

As he stood at the wrecked carriage, he saw that the driver, who had been flung some yards away, was not seriously harmed, since he staggered to his feet and started off at a gradually increasing rate of speed in the direction taken by his horses.

The one side of the carriage was crushed in—on the other side Preston Blaine tore the door open expecting to find some one dead or badly hurt. There was no doubt but that he had heard a cry of agony from within.

In some surprise he started back.

Neither cry nor groan came from the vehicle, but, instead, two men, who were very much alive, though seemingly dazed from fright. Without a word they sprung through the opening, and darted away, following in the direction taken by the horses and driver.

"What idiots are these?" said Blaine, half-aloud.

"I suppose they've all got away and left me to explain the racket. Confound them, what's the use to run now?"

He was satisfied that there was nothing human there; and yet, with the thoroughness that had always characterized him, he reached into the darkness to make sure.

He drew his hand half-way out with a little cry of surprise.

There was still some one left; and this some one would not run away. If he was not a corpse he felt strangely like one.

"There's a dead man in there," he said in a low, solemn tone to the men who came pushing up. "We must get him out."

The body lay down among the debris on the shattered side. To bring it out and carry it to the sidewalk under the lamp on the corner was but the work of a moment.

The sight of the face was more than a surprise, it was a terrible shock.

"Heavens and earth!" the major exclaimed, scarcely willing to believe the evidence of his own senses.

"It is General Rawle!"

"Phat's that ye sez?"

A man in the uniform of a policeman pushed hastily forward, and gazed down into the white face.

"Say that name wanst more."

"It is General Hector Rawle—a friend of mine. He has just been killed in a collision of his carriage with a street-car."

"Thin, be the powers, it's a long time he war a-dyin'! The Gilt Edge Gang shtomped the loife outen him an hour or two ago, clane at the ither ind av the shtrait, an' be ther same token, it war yersilf ez shtole him away. If yez hev bin roidin' him 'round iver since, it would hev killed him ag'in widout smashin' av him ag'inst a shtrait-car. Did yez think Oi'd shtand by an' say bloody murder done fur yer dirty tin dollars? Come out av that, me b'y! Sure an' this toime Oi'll pull yez in, anyway."

Policeman McCulligan had struck the second edition of the Rawle mystery, that had been puzzling him more and more the oftener he thought of it. His hand, that was neither tender nor slender, gathered up a goodly section of the major's coat-collar, and he was evidently in dead earnest.

"Don't be foolish, Michael," said the major, sharply.

"I had no more to do with this matter than you. I was standing on the corner waiting for

a car, and happened to see the accident. Now I recognize this gentleman as a friend of mine."

"So yez said wanst afore, at the ither ind av the shtrait. Av yez couldn't foind his place in two hours, yez don't know it no better than yez should. This time he goes to the hospital, an' you goes to ther lock-up."

"I tell you, man, you're crazy! Here's my card. I don't remember to have seen you before for a week—certainly not this evening. While you are making a fool of me, the general is dying. He should be moved to his own rooms at once. If that can be done before he comes to, there is a chance for him yet."

"Phat yez said before, an' here yez are, dhrivin' 'round yit."

McCulligan spoke a little more doubtfully. He could not help but recognize the genuineness of the hopeful ring in the major's voice.

"Confound you, do you think I want to run away? Here's a man hurt near to death. If you have half an eye you can see something must be done. These gentlemen will help. Go with us, and I will show you that I am in earnest."

"Now yez shout—ef yez don't m'ane Castle Garden er ther flats at Harlem. But I don't lit me eyes off av yez until I sees yez a square mon, an' knows why yez hev bin dhrivin' 'round half ther noight wid a corrupse."

"In Satan's name, help us now, and I'll satisfy you afterward—if I have to do it with a club."

The last few words were spoken *sotto voce*, or perhaps Policeman McCulligan would not have been so willing to assist. As it was, he followed the procession with alacrity, but all the time keeping a keen watch on Preston Blaine.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN COMES TO GRIEF.

It was an actual fact that the victim of all this ill-treatment was yet alive.

Certainly he had gone through sufficient that night to kill an ordinary man.

The blows that had beaten him down in the first place had been enough, when administered to other unlucky wights, to settle them beyond resurrection.

In addition, as the reader knows, he had been handled by no means tenderly; and, finally, had sustained a shock in the collision, that was of itself serious enough.

Nevertheless, he was recovering something of his senses, and though not yet able to speak, he evidently understood much of what was now going on—or thought that he did.

Evidently he had no great confidence in the good intentions of the procession; and had he been a little stronger might have made an effort to break away.

Major Blaine noticed this, if no one else did, and he tried to reassure him by some whispered words of encouragement; but his only answer was an unrecognizing stare.

Policeman McCulligan was close at hand.

He had turned over the charge of the wrecked carriage to one brother officer who made his appearance on the corner before the departure of the little squad. Another was started on the trail of the runaways, for McCulligan did not believe that they would return, and obstinately refused to be convinced that the major was not one of the party and would not attempt to escape at the first opportunity.

"What under the sun are you bringing us here?" exclaimed the night-clerk's assistant, as the attendant deputation came uproariously in. He had just gone on and failed to recognize Blaine.

"I've found him," answered the major, "but I'm afraid he is in a bad way. Hush! don't make a noise. I don't want the news to get out, for we must break it gently to his daughter."

"Break what?" Who are you talking about and what's the meaning of bringing him here?"

He pointed in angry disgust at the battered figure of the half-conscious man, and then took a couple of steps, as if about to come around and bar the way.

"Can't you see?" interrogated Blaine, angrily. "If you don't recognize me you ought to know General Rawle when you see him. I believe he boards here."

The major was angry and threw all the scornful emphasis he could into his words; he was scarcely prepared for the outbreak that followed.

"Come, come! this won't do! This isn't a hospital. And that game is thin as your cheek isn't. General Rawle came in fifteen minutes ago, and just went up-stairs."

"You are mistaken, my friend," answered Blaine, trying to speak calmly.

"I ought to know the general. I was with him in his rooms to-day, and I served on his staff some years during the late war."

"Can't help it, if you married his grandmother. The general is in his rooms, and we've no accommodations for your friend, who looks more like a sneak thief that had been through a bark-mill than General Rawle. Get out of this, or I'll call the police."

"Sure, an' I knowed ther was some shenanagin. Oi'll take him roight along wid me. He

can't come any av his goom games over McCulligan. Come in, me b'ye, out av the wet."

This time the policeman was in dead earnest, and Blaine, who was more puzzled than frightened, was nevertheless in a fairer way than ever for going to the station-house, a terribly unpleasant ending to his Good Samaritan efforts. That would have been the probable result had not the door opened and General Rawle himself entered.

He had come down-stairs again, and made his appearance just when he was wanted.

He surveyed the scene for an instant, and saw enough to tell him that his younger friend was in some kind of difficulty.

Then he stepped forward and rested his hand lightly on the major's shoulder.

"How's this? How's this? In trouble as usual! What is the matter now?"

Blaine stared.

Up to this moment he had been unable to acknowledge that there had been any error on his part, but he could now hold out no longer.

"I'll give it up," he said, still puzzled. "I've made enough mistakes to-night to muddle my brain for a month. I'll be hanged if I wouldn't have sworn that I had you in tow—now who is your double?"

"If he looks like me, I suppose I'll have to look after him a little."

The general had been using his eyes and had seen that his double had gone through a mill that beat a thrashing-machine, and that nevertheless he seemed to be a man of respectability and position. At any rate he did not intend that he should be neglected. A few words to the clerk made quite a difference in the attitude of that functionary, and between them they mollified Policeman McCulligan sufficiently to induce him to depart.

It took some little time to look after the stranger and stow him away for the night.

He had done better than could have been expected, while being let alone. He was weak, but had his senses about him, though he had very little to say. He did not seem to know what had happened to him; and about all he wanted was to be washed and put to bed.

The major was an amateur surgeon of no mean skill. His fingers went over the man's head as softly and yet firmly as if he was walking the hospitals every day.

He found no fracture of the skull, the thing that he expected, and he forbore to ask many questions. When he had seen the stranger safely stowed away he and the general left him, without much fear that his injuries would prove either serious or lasting in their effects.

"This has been a day brim-full of adventures," remarked Blaine.

"I had expected lively times when I threw myself into the Gilt Edge Gang business; but the meeting with you and your daughter, and finally with this stranger, have all been thrown in."

"And this stranger—who is he? Tell me something about him. Where did you pick him up? I confess the resemblance is somewhat startling, though, if he is not thoroughly dazed, he is about as ungrateful for little attentions as any man I ever saw. How did the accident occur? I couldn't make head or tail out of what I heard."

"It's a queer sort of affair, and I'm anxious to get at the rights of it myself, though I'm not so sure he will tell his story—or if he even can. That McCulligan seems to know something about the start of it."

"But he is evidently a gentleman; and he has met with bad usage. Certainly he will not let it rest here."

"I don't know. There is a mystery somewhere, though when you follow it back I am in hopes it will lead to the Gilt Edge Gang. It is their work. But if that policeman tells the truth I cannot understand why he should have been hauled around in a carriage so long when he could have been easily disposed of."

"You have that gang on the brain, I verily believe."

"Perhaps I have—I'm after them close enough. And by the way, now that I think of it, you gave me a point to-day, that fits into this evening's affair with wonderful exactness."

The general laughed.

"What was that? I'm not much in the point line, or I would have dropped down on that infernal intruder. He scared Regina half out of her senses. I'll be even with him yet."

"Don't you remember saying the name was a translation of an eastern one?"

"I believe I did say something of the kind."

"Well, you may believe me or not, but the other three occupants of the carriage were never born on this continent. I doubted at first, but the more I think of it the more I am satisfied that they were Asiatics."

"Is this truth you are telling me, or is it a little imaginative coloring?"

The general spoke so seriously that Blaine looked at him in surprise, and forgot to be offended at the insinuation.

"Of course it is truth, and I ought to be hunting up Captain Hardy to put him on the trail, instead of allowing that blundering McCulligan a chance to muddle it all up."

"Then you do not think that the three were

friends of the injured man, or that they will come back to inquire about his fate?"

"I do not think so. More than that, unless I am greatly mistaken, there will be no inquiries about the wrecked carriage—by them at least. If there is you can trust the Irishman to work that clew for all that it is worth."

"Tell me the whole story. I am growing more interested in this than you would believe."

If appearances went for anything the general was interested. Though there was little new to add, Preston Blaine went over everything again, from the moment that, standing on the corner, the carriage had appeared to him.

"And how did you happen to be on the corner?" asked the general, thoughtfully, at the conclusion of the brief recital.

"I can hardly tell you that, you know—confound it, general, you ought not to ask a man such questions, I—fact is, you remember the warning we got? It bothered me all evening, and so, when I got through with what I had in hand, I naturally wandered here to see if you were all right. You hadn't come in yet, and after a few words with Miss Regina, I started for home. That was the way I came to stumble into the mix."

"It is very odd," answered the general, musingly.

"I would not have thought that such a thing could happen. You are sure that the horses were running away?"

"Reasonably so. I am a judge of such matters, you know. But, general, you will have to excuse me for to-night. I must be going. Perhaps I will have something more to tell you tomorrow when I meet you. Only don't let our friend, your double, get away without my seeing him again—or leaving his address. I don't know that he will speak, but if he does, something tells me that he can help me along a good way toward the solution of the puzzle."

"I will see to it," was the grave response, and the two men separated for the night.

Without further adventure, the lively reporter reached his den, and, wearied out by the day's work, his head had scarcely rested upon his pillow before he was asleep. If he had known the terrible revelation that was made to General Rawle, not ten minutes after leaving, his slumbers perhaps would not have been so sound.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY.

THE conversation with Preston Blaine had consumed some time, and the hour was late when the major took his departure. General Rawle did not linger long, but went slowly and thoughtfully to his room.

When he unlocked the door and entered, all seemed quiet—horribly quiet. He never had been cursed with what is ordinarily called "nerves," but, somehow, he felt them just then tingling from heel to eyebrow. Not the least inclination had he to sleep, as he threw himself heavily into an arm-chair and dropped his face on his hands.

Though apparently lost in reflection, from time to time he gave certain starts and twitches, that showed he was by no means at ease.

His mind would wander back from the outside world to the room in which he was seated.

After a little, he could stand it no longer. Rising, he turned the gas higher and looked around him.

On the table he saw a folded sheet of note-paper.

He recognized it as being from Regina's portfolio. When she retired before he came in she was in the habit of leaving just such notes, telling him of some little, unimportant thing that would in reality, have kept just as well until the next morning.

The sight of it somehow made him feel easier. He picked it up and read:

"Lizzie has gone, with my permission, to spend the evening with her aunt. She may not be back to-night. As I do not feel well, I shall retire early."

Then below this was added:

"Major Blaine has called, asking for you. I do not think it is anything important. I was beginning to be uneasy, but he reassured me. Good-night."

The general smiled, and there was something warm about his smile.

"I cannot be the worst man in the world," he thought, "or Regina would not care for me. I suppose she has been asleep for an hour or so; yet I wanted to say something to her to-night—to put her on her guard. Regina!"

He spoke softly, as though he would not willingly awaken her if she was truly asleep.

There was no answer, though he turned toward the slightly opened door in a listening attitude.

"Ah, she must be asleep. She is strangely quiet. Would that I could rest as sweetly."

She was resting very sweetly indeed. The quietest sleeper is apt to utter some audible sound.

The general did not think of that. Without any reason at all he stepped silently to the door and listened.

Still no sound.

The influence that had been so mysteriously at work, strengthened by lapse of time. It led him still further.

He opened the door and looked within the room.

Then something caused him to dash into the bedroom, and turn up the dimly-burning gas to full flame. It was not what he had seen, but what he had felt.

He never dreamed of what was to meet his eyes—even when he caught a glimpse of a twisted body, a terribly distorted face, he did not at once understand.

Then, like a flash, it all came to him, and covering his face with his hands, to shut out the horrid sight, he staggered back, groaning:

"Murdered, murdered! Good heavens, Regina is murdered!"

It was a momentary weakness, for which he could scarcely be blamed. In spite of the eventful experience of his life, this shock tried him hard.

He looked once more, this time with a stern gleam in his eyes.

There could be no mistake about it, and he rushed to the bell-rope.

Down-stairs a quiet-looking little man in a subdued suit of gray had just sauntered in as the wild application of the general's hand to the cord awoke the echoes below.

There was something startling in his ring, that impressed the night clerk.

"General Rawle's room—something wrong. I have half a notion to go myself. Ah, what is it? He is in a hurry, some one sick, perhaps. Really it may be worth while to go and see."

One man was already on the run, he was speaking to another without noticing that the quiet-looking man stood almost at his shoulder while he spoke, and followed him closely through the halls as he hurried away. There was another, then, who had a premonition of what that sudden jangle meant.

There were half a dozen excited people in the general's room already as the clerk burst in.

"For heaven's sake, what is the matter?" said he, as he came.

"Murder is the matter," responded the general, sternly. "Send for a doctor—though no doctor can help her now. Look! When I came back after a few hours' absence I found this. Am I in a den of assassins?"

He waved his hand toward the bedside, but he did not allow his own glance to turn thitherward. He had seen the sight there once and could stand no more of it. Instead he staggered back to the seat he had at first assumed and buried his face in his arms on the table. It was enough that he had told the outside world. It might do the rest—at least until he was able to face it more bravely than he could now.

A hand fell on his shoulder.

He did not move.

"Grief is something that is all the better for keeping; there is something else that is worth a good deal more just now."

It was a quiet voice that whispered in his ear, and to its owner probably belonged the hand that still rested on his shoulder.

Rawle looked up with lack-luster eyes. The movement alone showed the question that he would ask.

"Vengeance," said the little man, interpreting the gesture aright.

"It has not happened so long since, and no doubt there are traces that will bring crime right home to the bloody perpetrators."

"And who, then, are you?" asked the general, in an absent way.

"A private detective, with headquarters in my hat. Will you offer any reward? If so I should have first chance to win it, as I was first on the spot."

"Leave me," answered the general hotly.

"What is vengeance to me, now? She was all I had."

"Your daughter, then. Can you conceive of the object? Look around you, and see if anything is missing. It is for your own interest that I speak. It may have been done for the sake of robbery; it may have been for some other reason. Whatever is behind it, it is a foul crime all the same."

"Curse you, man, how can I think? Give me a moment or two to recover myself. You are cool, anyway."

"It is my business to be cool. If you will give me the slightest clew I will think for both."

The steady tones had their influence. Evidently Rawle was yearning for some one to rest upon, and was ready at a suggestion to give his confidence.

But even now he hesitated a little.

"Who are you? How did you find your way here? Why should I trust in you? Give me a moment or two and I will be myself, and can think for myself. Send for Major Blaine, will you?"

"All in good time. He shall be here if you think, after talking the matter over, that he is needed. Here is my card, that will show you who I am; and, as for being here—I was down-stairs and came up with Patterson. We detectives scent crime and criminals from afar."

The bit of pasteboard simply said:

"SEPTIMUS WARDLAW,

"PRIVATE DETECTIVE,

"Box —.

New York City."

"Mr. Wardlaw," said the general, looking down at the card. "If an inspection shows that it is not a case of common robbery and brutal murder, then I have an idea. Search for these foreigners—Asiatics. They, and they only, will have done the deed. I will trust you. Take charge so far as my personal interest goes, until Major Blaine comes, and be guided by his counsel afterward. Now, ask me no more. I cannot bear it. She was my only child."

The detective looked earnestly at the speaker, and, as his words died away in a groan, something like pity appeared for a moment in his own almost immobile face. Then he turned away.

Fortunately Mr. Patterson was a man of judgment, and had also a sharp eye to the interests of the hotel. After the first shock was over his object was to prevent any excitement, if possible. He had already dispatched one man on an errand; now he closed the door behind him and held up both hands.

The most of those there were employees, who were ready to obey his orders. The others were willing to share a secret.

"The police must be notified; but for mercy's sake don't start a panic. We don't want all the world in here to-night, or to-morrow all the world will be running away. No doubt if we give General Rawle a few minutes to recover himself he will be able to offer some suggestions."

He had seen the detective talking to Rawle, and was willing to wait until that conference was ended. While waiting, though, he looked keenly around, in search of any tell-tale marks, that might give a clew.

Wardlaw came forward.

"Nothing has been touched. That's right. We have a fair field for investigation, and at the start that is everything. Don't bring any one else here; there are enough of us as it is. No, I forgot, Mr. Patterson, do you know where Major Preston Blaine can be found? General Rawle expresses a wish to have him present."

"That's the newspaper man that was here with him to-night. I don't know exactly where he holds forth but I will have him hunted up. If we can't do any better they will know at some of the dailies. We might send around to the up-town offices."

"All right; do so. Until he comes I will act for the general. Perhaps we may find some clew."

"You are a detective?" asked Patterson, in a low tone.

Wardlaw nodded, and then approached the bedside.

"It is a clear case of murder," he said, after a glance.

"No person could leave those marks on his or her own throat. The young lady was deliberately strangled. Who did it?"

"The man that dropped this," said one of the others, rising from the floor to which he had stooped, and holding out his hand.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DETECTIVE'S DANGER.

THE object held up to the curious gazers was a knife.

There was no blood on the blade, for it reflected back the light from either glittering side; yet it seemed to be a revelation in itself, for, unless it was a very perfect imitation, from no Western manufactory could such a weapon have come.

"That's a queer-looking thing," said Mr. Patterson, extending his hand to take the find. "It appears to me there can be very few fellows to it in the whole city, and if it was dropped here it might give an idea of what sort of persons we will have to deal with. Is it not so, Mr. Wardlaw?"

The detective was not looking at the speaker. His eyes were fixed on General Rawle, who had glanced up at the exclamation of the finder, and now looked as though he recognized the strange blade. In fact, he arose and came forward.

"Give it to me," he said, in a quavering voice. "That has done no harm. See! no blood on its blade. It is mine. Perhaps the villains found it here, and then threw it aside. I will swear that I brought it from India with me."

"Then it is no clew at all," said the disappointed night clerk.

"No clew at all," echoed the general.

And then there came a rap at the door. The outside world had scented the affair, and the chance for quiet investigation was almost over.

Wardlaw had seen everything that was to be seen, while the rest were talking over the one point. Again he drew Rawle aside.

"Have you no female friends?" he asked.

"Not one in the city, or near it. The girl who has been her companion and maid, by some evil chance is to-night visiting her friends. I will send for her."

"Ah! well, no matter. No doubt everything can be arranged decently enough. I have seen everything here; now it is time that I get to my work. By the way, are you sure that knife was

not brought here by one of the assassins? It would be a splendid thread to hold."

Rawle leaped forward and spoke in the lowest kind of a whisper:

"To you I will own the truth. No; I am not sure. And yet—"

"Did you or did you not tell the truth in what you said? If you have begun by deceiving me—beware!"

The general did not notice the threat. He went on more evenly than ever:

"I told the truth; but not all of it. I did bring that knife with me from the East, but I have not seen it before for years."

"And have you known in whose hands it was during that time?"

"Unless it changed owners, I might have guessed."

"The name? Perhaps we are on the eve of discovery."

"I do not care to give it—I would not before that crowd. To you I may confide it, since you can see that my confidence does no harm. It was not that of the criminal, certainly, for it was to a woman I gave it."

"A woman! Who was she? No woman's fingers left those marks. They must have been the work of a hand of iron. Yet through her we may reach the real criminals. Quick. Her name."

"You would hardly believe me, but I do not know it. To me she was known only by the pseudonym of Madam Velvet. Ours was a brief acquaintance, suddenly ended when I left the country again, and never renewed."

"Madam Velvet!" said the detective, with a quick knitting of his brow. "Ah, you have done well to confide in me in preference to the rest. Let us see. I have heard of the woman—very beautiful they tell me; but very bold. What was she doing when you knew her? Eh?"

"She was a variety actress. Not very creditable to my judgment; and yet—you are not mistaken. She was the most beautiful woman I ever saw."

"Why should she play such a desperate game like this? Tell me without reserve. Is there any special debt of vengeance that she owes you? If I knew that there was, I would say that we had made a find already."

"None that I know of. If we were to meet to-day, as far as I know, it would be as friends. But you are losing time in an idle speculation. Would it not be better to make inquiries, and learn if any one has been seen to leave this house who might be the guilty party?"

"Have no fears. I can find out all that I want to know in that direction. It is more important that I know from you the motive. Enough of this, however, for the present. It may be that you have given me the clew I needed. I will see Madam Velvet to-night."

"Then you know where to find her?"

"I should think so. What would I be worth if I didn't? She lives, flourishes, and is as handsome as ever. If I know anything about her habits she is dealing faro this blessed minute; and if she had any hand in this matter, I'll wager that she is the most unconcerned person connected with it. I will go now. Keep quiet. Do not talk about what you intend doing, and I will see you again to-morrow. Perhaps it would be better not to have our meeting here. I will send you an address and, if possible, be at the place I indicate."

The detective spoke positively and sharply, and Rawle without hesitation gave the desired promise. He even attempted to detain Wardlaw, who was evidently about to leave, going with him to the stairway, talking all the way, and trying to put off as far as possible the moment when he would be all alone with his own reflections. Could he have known the thoughts of this man he might have been less willing to talk.

As he went down the stairs a wonderful change was taking place. The deserted condition of the corridor favored him, and surely Mr. Patterson himself might have doubted whether this was the man he had seen in close consultation with General Rawle. But, in addition as he went out of the door he was saying:

"I'm not as certain as I was that he is the guilty man, though at first I did suspect him. He may bear watching yet; but his grief bears evidence of being genuine, and there is no present object—unless he discovered that some one had been tampering with his papers. The madam is the most likely clew. If I don't gain some information between them, I'll be very much fooled. Ah, it makes me shiver when I think what might have happened. Lucky I came trailing back on this mixed-up affair of the beaten man and met her. Now, if I work my cards right, whatever else I find out I will have a chance to worm myself into his confidence. But first I must find Regina. She was in too great haste to say it, and no doubt the girl was shocked out of her senses when she saw what had happened, but of course will have had enough to go to the house on the Avenue and wait for orders. It is evident that after this complication, she must disappear completely. Yet how will it be when the time arrives for her to come back? If there's not a

pretty clear explanation all around it strikes me that there will be trouble for some one. And who was this last victim of the Gilt Edge Gang? I ought to see him at once; but he will have to keep till morning."

Wardlaw, as he had been called under the last alias he had chosen to give himself, was walking rapidly while he was thinking. When he suddenly turned a corner and dived into the darker side street he seemed to be as utterly heedless as the veriest bumpkin who had strayed into the city, and was around town on the loose.

So well disguised was he that he had no fear of being recognized in his true character, and the only dangers he contemplated, were the ordinary dangers of the city; yet, in spite of his seeming carelessness, his senses, from the force of long training, were all on the alert.

He was not altogether alone in the street, however.

Just far enough ahead to be seen fairly from the corner, he could notice two persons.

They were well dressed, very respectable looking; probably two business men returning slowly home late from the theater, or club room, having their little confidential conference, since their heads were inclined toward each other from either side of the pave. The quasi detective rapidly overhauled them, and was just about to pass, without a thought of danger, when they suddenly wheeled, and like lightning, struck two desperate blows full at his face, while a third man sprung up from the shadow of a porch and swung a murderous-looking bludgeon at the nape of his neck.

"Be the powers," said a voice with a strongly-marked brogue. "Ye'll play Paddy the Piper, will yez? Take that."

CHAPTER X.

THE POLICE LOSE THEIR GRIP.

At the sudden, brutal attack, the chances seemed ten to one that Wardlaw would receive the *coup de grace*.

In fact there was a howl; and then two men dropped instead of one.

If he had been ever so alert, and with an extra pair of eyes in the back of his head, he could not have timed his motions to a more complete nicety. There was no time to guard or strike, and there was no chance to retreat, since he was beset on every side.

Though he flung himself on the ground so quickly, he barely escaped the blow of the club from behind, which, passing over his head, dropped one of his assailants, who partly fell against his companion, causing him to stagger back. Before these two could recover themselves, a hard head pitched like a cannon-ball into the victualing department of one of them, and if he did not go down at once, it was because a pair of strong arms were wound around him. While he gasped for breath, the strong arms lifted him from the ground as though he was a child, and he was flung clean over Wardlaw's head.

This move gave the detective the victory, for his human projectile struck the third man with knock-down force. In almost the time taken to tell it, the one had laid out the three.

There was no tender squeamishness about Septimus Wardlaw, either. He wheeled like a flash and sprung at the man he had flung over his head, landing upon him with both heels, and finishing the task of knocking him silly; then he bounded at the man with the club, evidently intending to serve him in the same way.

In an eel-like manner the attack was partially evaded. His one foot only struck the wrist of the hand that grasped the bludgeon.

The staff fell to the pavement, but the owner of it was out of the way in an instant, reaching his feet with cat-like activity, and immediately bounding away.

As the two other men were scrambling up, it was not safe to follow in pursuit of the fugitive. To escape one attack from the rear was about as much as could be hoped for.

Instead of giving chase, he caught up the cudgel, and gave a regular policeman's rap on the pave.

There was an immediate answer from the avenue near by, and the runaway almost sprung into the officer's arms as he hurried around the corner.

The encounter did not at all confuse him. He halted at once, just out of arm's reach, and pointed backward.

"You see that man that has just been going for me? He is a murderer that's wanted, and there's a big reward if you gather him in. Craig Clayton is his name, and don't you forget it. He's a desperate case, and I don't want any more of him in mine."

He spoke rapidly and authoritatively. When he had said this much, he darted away, and was gone before the startled policeman could ask him a single question, or make a movement to detain him.

It happened that the officer had heard of the Clayton case, though he had never seen the hero of it himself. As he advanced he heard a sharp voice:

"Officer, take these men in charge for assault.

I am a private detective—Wardlaw—here is my card. You've got a chance for a finger in a big thing if it's worked right."

"Don't you believe a word he says. That's Craig Clayton, with a thousand dollars on his head. I know him like a book. He would have killed the lot of us if you hadn't turned up. Run him in. There's big money in it."

The fugitive had turned and slipped back long enough to fling an armful of doubts at the policeman. After that he did not tarry to see the result, and if he only wanted to provoke an investigation of Wardlaw's identity, there was no need for him to do it. His words had had their effect.

"The very Old Scratch seems to have broken loose around here to-night," thought the officer. "If there's a chance for a thousand dollars, though, you bet I'm going for it."

He put out his left hand toward Wardlaw's collar, at the same time raising his locust with his right, half expecting a desperate resistance.

Instead he found that he had encountered the most peaceable of lambs.

"You are making a mistake if you interfere with me, or take any account of what that villain says. It's too late to catch him now. He's half a dozen blocks away by this time; but here are two of his pals. If you will gather them in I have no objection to helping you to the station-house with them, and there you can find out all about me. I wouldn't be surprised if there was more money in these two men than in half a dozen Craig Claytons, whoever he may be."

"I reckon the best way would be to pull you all three," answered the policeman, gruffly, though a little staggered by the offer. "I will want a truck to move them, though. It strikes me they've got a good bit the worst of it if they were trying to run against you."

"People that try that usually do," answered Wardlaw, coolly.

"But these men are not half as dead as they seem. Better rap up help. If they're only shamming, they may get away from you, yet."

"Be easy. Help is coming now; I hear it. That rap did the business."

Two more policemen turned up when they were wanted, showing that the age of miracles had not altogether ceased.

They were resolute men, too, who did not want an interview to see which way interest pointed before acting. As the beaten men seemed to be recovering consciousness, and would be able to walk, since no bones were broken, the first officer tightened his grasp on Wardlaw's arm, flourished his club, explained the situation briefly, and set off in advance with his prisoner.

"Jack's a daisy," said one of the coppers to the other. "He's got something in hard there, and he's going to freeze us out. We'll hustle these fellows up and get in about as soon as he does, eh?"

"That's my notion. Kim out av this, ye bastes! No shenanigin. It's moighty foine clothes yez wear; but I've see'd better-lookin' chaps nor you be sent to the island. March!"

The prisoners did not even protest, but acting as though they were too frightened or too badly hurt to demur, they stumbled along, only muttering to each other some words that were unintelligible to their custodians.

A very peaceable procession it was for a minute or two.

Then the prisoners showed that they had only been biding their time—one minute they were there, and the next they were not. The unexpectedness of their attempt made it successful. They darted into the door of a saloon, and though closely pursued, their disappearance somehow was as complete as it was sudden, and what was singular, not a man in the saloon knew what had become of them, though quite a crowd must have seen them enter.

The search proved vain, and as there seemed little doubt but what they had left by a back way, or dodged back into the street, it was finally given up, and the wrathful officers went their way.

When they had got fairly out of sight of the doorway, they met the first policeman returning.

"Have you seen him?" he asked, breathlessly, as he recognized his comrades.

"Seen who? That the deuce are yez doin' here, an' where's yer bird that yez wanted to smuggle away?"

"That's what I'm asking. He must have had wings, if he didn't have hoofs. While we were walking along peaceable as you please he jumped in, gave me the back heel, and when I had picked the stars out of my eyes, he was gone. Where's your men?"

"Be blazes, there's thray av a koind. Our min are gone, too; an' ther brightest thing we kin say is jist ter say nothin' at all, if we don't want ter be laughed off av ther sstrate."

"It looks like it, and I don't think I want to blow. Only I'd like to see the other man. I begin to think he was the cully we ought to have frozen onto."

"Which man was those? Divil a wan did I say besides the three that got away."

"He was there, though—before you came; and cool as a cucumber, with his confounded talk about Clayton, and all that. He ought to

have been followed. The rest would have kept."

"But he wazzn't follyed, so what's ther use ter chin? I'm off now."

The citizen of Irish extraction was not contradicted, and yet he never was more wrong in his life than when he made his assertion.

The runaway was followed, and to some purpose. All through the struggle and the conversation that followed it a man had been looking on with a covert interest from a position only a few yards away.

He was a man of medium hight and build, with nothing about him that would attract particular attention, though of course his actions were suspicious enough to bring him into quick trouble had they been observed.

This man, in fact, was on the watch when Wardlaw—or Craig Clayton, as he had been called—turned into the street, and a dubious smile settled around his lips as he saw him march unsuspectingly forward.

He made no movement as though having any desire to interfere during the short, sharp contest that followed, but he followed every move with close attention. When the man with the bludgeon broke away his eyes turned to him and never left him after that. When he threw back at the policeman his last accusation he was not ten feet from the silent watcher, whose presence was so totally unsuspected, and when he finally moved off, his rubber-shod feet making no sound on the pave, he evidently did not dream that he was tracked. Certainly he had left enough behind to detain any ordinary man.

Perhaps the man on his trail was something more than ordinary.

Certainly, as he rose up and glided away in pursuit, a smile curved his thin lips and he muttered to himself:

"Straight for Copper Sile's; and I'll bet large money that I have you, Mr. Paddy the Piper! It is time to strike, for it begins to look like having a hand in murder to hold the blow off longer."

The eyes never wavered, and scarcely for a minute at a time did he ever lose sight of the quarry that he was marking down; yet after a little a perplexed look came into his face.

"If he wants to be on time at Copper Sile's he's taking a mighty queer way to get there. There's something strange about this. I wonder if he suspects a trap, or if some one has been posting him up. Oh, good heavens! What is he doing there?"

The exclamation, that was really louder than was altogether prudent, was drawn from his lips at seeing the man ahead deliberately go up a set of steps, and without hesitation ring the door-bell.

Closer crept the man, taking risks that he had not heretofore cared to run, and though not within hearing distance of the low-toned conversation that followed, he was near enough to see that he was met in the doorway by a woman.

The two seemed to speak low and earnestly. Something like a letter passed between them.

"What is he doing there? Is the woman mad—or treacherous? I'd give a thousad dollars—no, a hundred, much more than that would break me all up—to hear what they are saying, and read that paper."

In spite of the danger, he moved still closer. If he had been seen by a policeman, his actions would have certainly brought him into trouble; but just as the man came down the steps the trailer ensconced himself in safety behind a neighboring porch.

The woman leaned from the doorway and looked after the retreating figure, and the watcher gave another start.

"It is Regina Rawle herself. What is she doing here at this hour, and what can she have to say to him?"

If he had heard, he would have been little the wiser. The man asked for "Lizzie." The woman answered that she had not been there. Then he left his letter and went on.

CHAPTER XI.

CAUGHT IN HIS OWN KENNEL.

THE woman drew back again after a moment, and closed the door softly. When she had done so, the spy darted from his place of concealment and once more followed his game.

"Ah, he's off for Sile's at last," he thought to himself. "I can afford now to try and head him off."

So certain was he now of the destination of the man he had surmised to be Paddy the Piper, that without any hesitation he dropped the direct trail, turning abruptly aside.

With all his caution he had not been as successful as he supposed, since for the last five minutes he had been watched in a furtive way by the man he had been watching, who now halted suddenly and shook his fist menacingly in the direction of the vanishing spy.

"Bad luck to yez. Ef it war safe, it's a pistol I'd be after usin' on yer bluddy, murtherin' siff. Couldn't yer come a little closer while ye wor at it, so ez I c'd give yez a poult wid me shtick? I wouldn't miss twice in one noight, an' it's foight I'd sooner be after than runnin' away. Is he waitin' round the corner, er is he

a-lurkin' nigh? Mebbe he's throw'd up ther sponge; but I must go careful anyway."

If this was the same man who had, from a safe distance, denounced Craig Clayton and the police his brogue had come back to him, even when communing with himself. His hesitation was no more than natural, since he evidently was in a hurry to be gone, yet at the same time anxious to know why the party in his rear had seemingly dropped from his trail, and whither he had gone.

"I haven't the toime er I'd show him a thing or two, an' ef it's a chance that he saw me wid Lizzie's friend, it's knockin' him crazy I ought to be after. Mebbe I'd better not have you there to-night, but I c'dn't do better. I'll thrust to me ligs, an' be off at a great rate."

If the man who had been in pursuit had been there trusting to his ability to trail he would have found he had an almost impossible job ahead of him. In and out of the different streets wound the Irishman, stopping at this saloon, going through that, meeting more than one acquaintance who gave him a nod, but did not seriously attempt to detain him until finally he seemed to reach his destination.

It was not at Copper Sile's either, though it was only next door to the den of that worthy. With the air of one who knows what he is about he applied a key.

There was no undue haste about his motions now, and before entering he gave a sharp look up and down the street, as if in search of the man he hoped he had thrown entirely off of his track; yet in a wonderfully short time he had disappeared, the door closing quietly behind him.

"Safe at last!" he exclaimed softly. "Now thin, to dawn in on the b'yes, an' give 'em a thrifle av a hint av what's in the wind. Sure an' me hand's full av worruk this blessid night! an' dayloight 'll be moighty apt to ketch me afore I'm done wid it all."

Through the house everything was as quiet as though it was deserted, yet he listened a moment in the hall.

Then he turned and went down a narrow stairway that led to the cellar.

He evidently knew the way well enough, since he went straight on, without hesitation or stumbling, though he was surrounded by perfect darkness.

At the bottom of the stairway, however, he stretched out his hand.

It fell upon a dark lantern, that rested on a convenient shelf. Opening the slide he struck a match.

Just then, holding in one hand the lantern, in the other the match, which was breaking into a sputtering flame, something like a deeper shadow seemed to rise up out of the night.

He must have felt its presence—certainly at that instant he saw nothing of it, though he made an awkward motion to defend himself. The lantern and the match confused him. There was the loss of a shade of time, and then a swinging blow caught him well up in the face.

The lantern dropped from his grasp as he went crashing back, and then what seemed the fingers of a giant caught him by the throat.

There was no struggle on his part. The first terrific blow had knocked him dizzy, and then, while the grip on his windpipe tightened, three or four more strokes were rained upon his face, cutting, stunning, rendering him perfectly helpless.

As he quivered and then straightened out, his assailant turned him over on his face, and deftly drawing his wrists together behind his back snapped a pair of handcuffs upon them.

Then another match was lighted, but this time it did its full duty in kindling the flame in the dark-lantern, which had been unharmed in its fall.

"I hated to take you foul, Paddy, but I had to do it. You never had any show at all, or you would no doubt have given a better account of yourself. You thought you had dropped me, did you? Ha! ha! It takes a better man than you to throw Charley Rand off of the trail."

It was the man whom Paddy the Piper imagined he had dropped. All the blind work done had been so much into his hands, since it gave him time to reach the house first, and conceal himself at the very spot where an attack could be most successfully made.

There was no more time wasted now. Rand first dexterously gagged his prisoner, so that if he recovered his senses he could not give an alarm, and then picking him up as though he was a child, he walked steadily away.

And he knew the ins and outs of the house well—better than Paddy the Piper, perhaps. He found a blind door where none had seemed to exist, and made his exit without trouble or delay. At every risk he intended to carry his prisoner through Copper Sile's cellar into the hiding-place of Regina Rawle's brother.

CHAPTER XII.

MADAM VELVET SEES AN OLD FRIEND.

MADAM VELVET, for a moment or two after she had been left alone in her secret apartment was by far too angry to think much of her own position.

It took a hard struggle to preserve the outward calmness which at times she thought had become a matter of habit. The noose was still around her arms, the gag still in her mouth, yet these indignities counted as nothing. It was the sudden escape of the prisoner, that troubled her. Whatever might be the meaning of the strange scene she had just witnessed it was certain that he had been taken out of her hands; and for some little time she had thought for nothing else.

But a few moments alone in the darkness, scarcely able to move served to change the current of her thoughts, and she began to see the unpleasantness of her own position.

To give any alarm seemed almost impossible, and no one than she knew better that unless she did there would be no intrusion there that night, perhaps not for the next twenty-four hours.

In that time what would become of her? She recognized her own weakness and was almost afraid.

A determined effort showed that the knotted cord on her wrists, had been fastened by no tyro; and with her mouth she could only utter a low, buzzing sound that scarcely could be heard through the confines of the room, much less beyond.

Her hands, however, were loose from the wrists out, and had they been in front instead of behind her she would have felt much easier.

She could not reach the hidden bell cord, and very well she knew that from within she was unable to turn the bolts that sealed the door.

The revolver in her breast gave her some hope.

It was no easy task to work it safely from its place; but when every other hope failed she turned to it, and after what seemed to be an age had the satisfaction of feeling it slide softly along her dress to the floor. To stoop, then, and pick it up from behind was not at all difficult.

Holding it carefully with a movement of her thumb she raised the hammer, and fired.

Almost instantly there was a gleam of light as the door was thrown open, and in the threshold stood a man holding a lamp on one hand, in the other a cocked revolver.

Madam Velvet looked up joyfully. In spite of her effort, aid had come very unexpectedly. It had hardly seemed possible that any one was within hearing distance, or would respond to so dubious an invitation as a pistol-shot.

The man's face, however, was hidden by a mask, and an ulster flung loosely over his shoulders served to disguise his figure.

He first peered curiously into the room; then closing the door with care, he advanced and cut the cord that held the gag in her mouth.

"So it is really you. Bless my soul, who would have supposed that a woman as shrewd as you are would have permitted herself to get into such an unpleasant predicament? I don't see how you are going to get out either. If some one don't happen along and find you, you will certainly starve to death."

There was meaning as well as mockery in his tone. The woman stared at him in amazement.

"Who are you?" she said, in a dry, husky voice.

"Perhaps I was in some danger of being kept here for a time as prisoner, but I can do very well whether you choose to assist me further or not."

"No doubt, no doubt. You might even have got along without me. In fact I was so afraid of that, that I could not rest until I had satisfied myself, by hearing from your own lips that I could be of some aid. I am interested in you, my dear, I assure you I am. It seems to me that you are just trying to throw your life away. Why should you be so foolish? It really is not like you?"

"And who are you, sir? Why should you, and how could you know anything of me or my peril?"

She looked at him sharply. To this moment she had failed to recognize a single familiar trait in either voice or figure. If she had not spoken of it, Madam Velvet had her curiosity to know why he should be masked and disguised.

At the question he laughed again—a hollow, joyless, cruel laugh and with a movement of his hand brushed back the mask from his face.

There was a cry of surprise wrung from her lips at last, and then she gasped.

"Edgar Raven!"

"Yes, my dear. Edgar Raven, at your service. You see that I am as hard-headed as of yore. Your bludgeons could not kill. I am a regular phoenix as it were, coming right back to life better than ever."

"But a moment ago you were lying here as if dead. I feared only that you would die. Then you were carried away."

"By my friends, my dear, my friends. They knew just where to come. No doubt your pretty fingers could have closed tightly enough on my throat to choke the life out if you had been left to work your wicked will on the poor wretch that had fallen into your hands. But they came in the nick of time. Wonderful conjurers they are, too; you wouldn't know, now, that your gang had been at me. And so I have come back, not to harm you, but to warn you.

Let me alone, Madam Velvet, let me alone. I do not want you to die just yet—I may have need of you before I am through with my game—but if you cannot hold your hand you should have seen enough to-night to convince you that I could crush you as I could crush a worm. I will leave you now, to your reflections. Perhaps you will begin to see that you have made a mistake, and are after the wrong man. Good-night."

Certainly he had his meaning in all this. Beyond his threats there must be some cold facts. He was slipping from her grasp, and no doubt he left her in danger, and to reflect that his hand could strike or spare. If he had only loosened her wrists.

He had been too wise for that—and yet not altogether wise enough for safety.

He was at the door now, which would close in another instant.

With a sudden whirl she brought her back toward him, and, with the revolver she still held in one of her pinioned hands, by guess fired one shot.

There was a stumble, and then the door closed with a clang, and Madam Velvet was once more in darkness and alone, standing with neck outstretched, listening with a very tigerish eagerness if by chance she might hear the noise of a fall or a groan.

No such sound greeted her ears, but after a little another did. There was a low tap, followed after the briefest of intervals by two sharp raps.

"Come!" she cried; and almost instantly the door opened, though it was only after the striking of a match that she could see that the newcomer was one of her allies—the man who had taken so daringly the body from McCulligan the policeman.

"Ah, Carlos, is it you?" she exclaimed. "I might have known you would be on hand when needed. Light the lamp and release my hands. The biter has been bitten this time."

He did her bidding without delay, and in a cold way expressed his surprise.

"Never mind. No strangers passed through from above I suppose?"

"No one at all. Where's your man?"

"Not here; that is enough. We've made a double mistake," she answered, gloomily.

"Either there is some one who knows our secrets as well as ourselves, or there is a treachery beyond that you and I never dreamed of. I know it is not with you, so do not think I blame you. Perhaps it was my mistake. It is certain that the man brought here was not General Rawle—nor was he badly hurt—that is, if I have not been mistaken again."

"How can that be. I didn't want to have a hand in the mix; but you offered big money, and I'd do most anything to serve you. I'll swear it was the man you pointed out; and if his skull stood the racket, it's because it's harder than iron. How did he get away?"

"Because he had backing, man alive; he was laughing in his sleeve. When you went, they came, and left me as you see."

"Then the game is up here, and the sooner we sherry, the better."

Carlos, for the first time, showed signs of excitement.

"Not as much in danger as you think. He will try to play with me as the cat plays with the mouse—and while he plays, something will happen. I suspect—good heavens! I suspect something I scarcely dare dream of! If true, I will follow another road that will be just as sure. Rest easy. Our secrets here will still be safe. They are in the hands of a man who needs me, and is worse than ourselves. But it is time we dropped in at the parlor. They may need us there, and after what has happened I should be seen at once."

Thoughtful and perplexed the two left the hidden chamber, and traversing several narrow passages, finally halted, and Madam Velvet held up her hand as she noiselessly pushed back a hidden slide in the wall.

After a moment she looked up, whispering:

"They are all at work, and the luck seems to be with Chilian Tom. If the game keeps going his way I will let him keep the box. I have an engagement in an hour or two. You go around by the other way, and I will slip in through my rooms."

She spoke with authority; and without waiting for an answer, retraced her steps a few yards and pressed against a panel in the wall.

Briefly halting in a neat little boudoir, she smoothed away all traces of her late adventures, and then stepped out into the glare of a brilliantly lighted parlor, where a throng of a score or more of gentlemen in broadcloth stood around the mahogany table where Chilian Tom had spread his lay-out.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GILT EDGE GANG.

A DOZEN heads were raised as Madam Velvet made her appearance. The game was an interesting one; but the madam was a very beautiful woman, and to look at her now no one would suspect the peril and adventure she had just passed.

Chilian Tom's thumb rested for a moment on the card in the door, as he glanced up with an inquiring look, but a nod of approval showed that there were no orders for him, and the deal went on.

"Good-evening, your Gracious Majesty. Have you deigned at last to come among us ordinary mortals? I have been waiting for that chance, not with the greatest patience in the world; but now I shall invest my little all in a handful of checks, and settle myself seriously to seeing how the game goes."

The speaker was young, handsome, elegantly dressed. His face had not yet gained the eager, almost wolfish look on those of many of his elders, and he laughed lightly as he shook a handful of gold coin to show that his little all was by no means a myth.

He seemed more than pleased when the madam flashed one of her brightest smiles at him.

"Thanks, Mr. Melton. I feel complimented accordingly. Of course, for our sakes, we are anxious to accommodate you; but for yours, I have an idea it would have been better if I had not come. I do not know how it happens; but there are two or three who go away shorn to one who shears. I suppose it must be the percentage of capital. If you choose to take the risk after that much warning, we shall have to let you. It is not often I say as much."

Very true it was that the madam was not in the habit of warning her victims, and if Clifford Melton had considered, he might have thought it was not without reason that the gambler queen made the exception in his favor. From the smile on his face it was possible that he did suspect a reason—and was a million miles wide of the mark. At any rate his face took on a pleasant look, as he answered recklessly:

"It's a fact that I'm down very near to hardpan, though of course it will be all right in a day or two. The old gentleman seldom stays hard-hearted more than a week, and this is the fourth day out. I did strike a streak last night; but I didn't know when to quit, so I had to interview my uncle to-day; and this is all my stony-hearted relative would advance me."

He clinked again the coin that he held in his hand; and though there was a smile on his lips, there was something wistful in his eyes, as he watched the beautiful woman at his side.

Her face grew grave, and she hesitated a moment before answering:

"Clifford, I am not so sure it would be good for you to win. If you were all broken up you might start fresh, and make something of yourself. Do you or don't you know that you are going straight to the dogs?"

Her voice was very low, so that only he could hear it, and if any man ever had reason to believe in her earnestness he had. Something like a smile of triumph lit up his face.

"There may be lots of truth in what you say, but I'd lose a dozen times over to have you show that much interest in a good-for-nothing like myself."

"Incorrigible," she murmured; then added:

"Play, then, and for once my wishes will be against the bank. You are more seriously situated than you imagine. You must win. Promise me that if you do you will go straight home from here, and not throw away a dollar of your winnings until you meet me here again to-morrow night."

"Oh, come. You are trying to give me false hope. I know I won't—can't win—"

"Promise."

She reiterated the word sharply, and held up her hand.

"If you are going to make a serious matter of it, of course you know that I will promise. Now for business."

In five minutes more he was at the table, for once playing with a steady coolness that he did not usually evince.

He had scarcely put down his first check when Madam Velvet turned away. When she had said a few words to this one and that she turned aside to Carlos, who had entered the room.

"You will have to look out for Tom this evening. I must leave soon and may not be back until late, if at all to-night."

Carlos looked at her curiously.

"You have nerve for a dozen; but don't travel on it too far. We helped you to-night for love, not for money, and there may be a mess about it yet. A failure like that is enough to blow everything sky-high, and I wouldn't blame you if you meant to bolt. Only, you ought to give us a wink before you go."

"I have no idea of going. This is the strike of my lifetime, and I don't mean to yet give it up."

"Well, you know your own game best; but it looks a little odd to see you clearing out with that kind of a crowd at the table. And they may notice it too."

"Don't worry. I'll take that young fool away with me when he wins—as he must—and if they think I've gone to pluck him at my leisure, it's a good excuse, and won't hurt the bank."

"Perhaps not; you know we'll stick by you as long as you stick to us."

He spoke pleasantly enough, but as she turned away he muttered to himself:

"All the same there's some kind of an advantage in the box; and I'll keep my eyes open. If she tries to give us away some one will be hurt. I wonder what she would say if she knew I could tell her where she was going?"

The madam seemed to care very little for his warning or his implied threat and smilingly she took her station behind young Melton.

His fortunes had some slight variations, but in the main he had won steadily. If his capital had been larger it would have counted faster; but the limit was beginning to suit his means better and better, and just as the queen of the den looked over the table he doubled it on the turn.

"You are rash," she whispered lightly in his ear; "but I think your luck has not quite run out yet. Ace, jack and deuce are good for three thousand. That will see you out of the drag. Then I'd advise you to quit while you've some chance left, and go with me. I want an escort, and I would sooner trust you for that than any other man here."

"If my call catches the turn you can depend on me. If it don't—well, I'll blow the rest in and follow with my brains. For once I'm in earnest."

She held up her shapely forefinger. Behind the queen in the zodiac lay the ace, and as that slid slowly forward it uncovered the heels of the jack. What lay behind that of course there was no need to ask.

"Cash in," said the madam with a smile, while a hum went around the table. Others had won a stake of that size; but it was something new for unlucky Melton to land such a one.

"Certainly," answered the young man. "You have my promise, and I shall be only too happy to make it good. A minute and I shall be at your service."

When Melton had stowed his funds away in his breast-pocket and buttoned his coat up, the two went out together.

A carriage was waiting at the curb and they entered. After what to another might have seemed rather a long drive, it stopped.

"Come with me until I see if I need you further. If I do not, I will send you home at once."

The house in front of which they had halted was like scores of other houses, and Melton paid no particular attention to it. He entered and followed into a well-furnished parlor, where he remained alone for fully ten minutes.

Then Madam Velvet came sweeping back.

"I have no more use for you, now. I have given orders. Get into the carriage and keep your promise."

She held out her hand with a royal sort of an air, and the young man grasped it warmly. The madam knew his infatuation well enough, and could trust him. When he came out he did not even glance about him. It was nothing to him if a man was watching the door, and gave a start and a stare as he passed down the steps and entered the hack. Just at that moment he was thinking only of the woman he had left behind him. He could not even give a guess at her errand to such a location, or why she had taken him with her and then dismissed him. Many a young man would have doubled on the driver and come back to see, if possible, the female; but he never even thought of doing it.

Madam Velvet knew him very well, and could trust him completely. When he had gone she went back to the rear of the house and descended a stairway, which brought her in front of a heavy, nail-studded door.

On this she knocked, using the same signals she had heard when the man came to rescue her from the unpleasant plight in which he was left by him she most often called Raven.

At once the door flew open, and crossing the threshold, she advanced three paces and halted. It was time, since she stepped into darkness, and at her breast was presented the point of a gleaming sword.

"Gilt!" she whispered promptly, extending her hand.

"Edge," whispered a voice in return, and a hand grasped hers firmly, pressing it in a peculiar manner.

The grip was returned, and an additional one given.

Then the voice added:

"Advance, brother, and work your way into the lodge."

She gave a short laugh, as if in mockery of the mummery; yet went forward unhesitatingly, halted twice at challenges while she gave the pass-words that the order required, and finally came to the hall of meeting.

"You are late, brother," said a voice in the darkness. "We have been waiting for you."

"Why did you wait then? The way was open for you to go."

"Right, brother. The session will now begin. Clothe yourself in regalia and take your place."

Just above the head of the speaker a glare of light appeared, showing a dozen men standing in a semicircle in front of a raised dais on which was the presiding officer. All were masked and cowed.

"Let us have as little of the nonsense as possible," she said, bowing to all in a sweeping way. "Those that will be here to-night know each other well, and clean, unvarnished business

is what we are after. Are we or are we not in danger?"

"We may be soon enough, if we are not now. For my part I would be willing to close everything up if I was sure we had left behind no trail that would lead to us. I had hoped that we could get away without any trace at all. Since there must be one, I am clear for wanting to leave one that leads away from us. What say you all?"

"If it can be done," hesitatingly interposed one.

"It is simplicity itself. We divide the treasury and go back to the world. For a year the circle ceases operations. And for the same length of time some one, taking up our business just where we leave it goes on with the work. It will not be hard to gain an indemnity for the past, and lay up a large stock of it for the future."

"I am willing enough to try—yes, and very glad to do it. I've enough to pay for an excursion to Europe and the Holy Land, and I think I'll take it. I smell danger, in the air, and have no objections to getting out of the draft. There's one thing that never was settled up yet to my notion and maybe there will be a chance to hear from it to-night."

The doubter spoke in anything but a contented tone, and a little murmur among the brethren showed that some agreed with him, and others were anxious to hear further.

"What's that you mean?" sharply asked Madam Velvet.

"The Wharton racket. I've got the first man to meet who could or would say where his money went."

CHAPTER XIV.

PADDY THE PIPER COMES ALSO.

It was a very bold and fearless game that Rand had played, but to every appearance it had won, and leaving Paddy the Piper helpless he hastened away to find out what was the upshot of the fracas with the police, and whether his partner in the affairs of the night was in condition to finish up the game. Long experience had made him reckless, and he had but little doubt about meeting Howard at the trysting-place already agreed upon.

When they met, as meet they did, Rand was laughing over his success, though his face grew long enough as he listened to the strange revelations in store.

"Yes, it's a terrible thing, and I'll see that justice is done, if it don't come in, incidentally, in the next twenty-four hours. But that much time I must have for the work already mapped out. Poor girl! she was not altogether true, but what could you expect? and certainly she was deserving of a better fate."

"We've struck a bad streak, but the only chance is to open our eyes wider and go ahead."

"Yes. The little Irishman grows more interesting. Who would have thought of his recognizing me or bringing up the old affair so flatly. If they once get a glimpse of me after this you can be sure they will be on the track again, full cry. Provoking, too! Mr. Wardlaw must disappear, leaving a lot of work undone that I could best have done from that direction. Keep an eye out for me to-morrow afternoon. I may have to go into hiding, but if I don't I'll meet you in a new shape and report progress. If I don't turn up within forty-eight hours you may consider I have gone up, and you will know how. Good-by. I'm after them now, hot-footed."

"It may win," said Rand, slowly; "and where there is a chance it is worth while to take the risk. But if it was not for the murder of this evening I swear I'd say try some plan that was safer. You hardly feel like enjoying the joke of it all just now."

"Very little joke would they find it, though, if I know anything about the little Irishman; before they got through with him it would only be a toss-up which they would sooner deal with. He can play King Stork too."

They separated, and Rand looked dubiously after his comrade.

"I should have told him what I saw while I was trailing Paddy. But I was afraid to say anything more, and perhaps it is all right anyway. He has helped me out more than once, and I never was slow about repaying my debts. When he wants me he knows where to find me. But it takes nerve to carry out any such game as he's on to-night, and if they find him out they'll kill him sure. I think I'd sooner wait and get my points in some slightly safer way."

"Anyhow I've got just about as ticklish a job. I've got Waite to watch, and at the proper time turn him over to the police, if it can be done without too much risk, I suppose. If not, we'll have to turn him loose, and catch him again."

There was a terrible truth in Rand's soliloquy, in spite of the jesting shape in which he framed his thoughts. Twice had he run the risk of his own life; and twice more would it have to be done before this section of his work would be complete.

At the same time the dangers of his friend and ally were double. The words of the real Paddy the Piper had been only too true. He was Craig Clayton, the convicted.

Yet with the gallows waiting for him, he was

ready to try to circumvent the criminal world that evidently had its eyes upon him. It was in his power to bring to justice—or at least before the courts—the man from whom he evidently had so much to fear; instead, he intended to strike a blow at a higher circle, and run his own risks. He had been hunted too long to fear ordinary dangers, and his escapes in the past had given him confidence for the future.

When he left Rand it was only a few steps to reach the cover that he sought, where he made a few rapid, skillful changes in his dress. Then he came out upon the street a totally different man. Fifteen minutes or so after Clifton Melton had taken his departure, he slouched up to the area of the same house.

"Whist, Bridget acushla, is it there yez are, me darlint?" he said, in a low, sharp whisper.

Instantly a woman appeared. If any outsider had been about, he would have sworn that it was one of the servants, and without being so far wrong.

"Och, Pathrick, honey, I've been waitin'. Phat delayed yez?"

"Jist the l'aste bit av a ruction that Oi'll tell yez all about when I come in. Don't let's be sthandin' here, er some av ther b'yes will want to be wid us."

"Not a shtep does yez come in to-night ontill Oi know how soon yez conthemplates goin' out ag'in. Spake quick, or I'll run away. Oi'm nearly dead with freight alridy for fear ther mighthress will come."

"Fourteen minnits an' a half, you illegant craythur. I daren't make it fifteen, or I would!"

"I kin thrust yez that long. Come on quick, an' none av yer foolishness."

The whole thing went on so quietly and consistently, that no listener could possibly have suspected that in the words uttered, there was a regular series of questions and answers, or that at least one of the two had never before seen the other.

The answers were all correct, and the supposititious Patrick disappeared within the house, where his identity was still further tested, and he was finally brought into the presence of the conclave assembled, as detailed in the last chapter.

Madam Velvet was masked and cowed so thoroughly, that in that in the dimmed light no one could have detected that she was a woman. The scene and the position might well have tried the nerves of the boldest; but they seemed to have no effect upon the nerves of the jaunty little Irishman.

"None av yer foolishness wid me," he repeated, boldly. "Yez sint me wurrud thet ther wor a chance fur big money, an' O'im here. Phat is it that yez wants wid Paddy the Piper?"

"Don't attempt any of your bluff games with us, my good man. You may drop that brogue as we know you can, or, you may twist your tongue off trying to keep it up. That's all right. First and foremost to make good our promise. Here is five hundred down to show that we are in earnest. That for your visit here. Whether we come to terms or not you're that much ahead."

"If Oi don't git me brains stove in wid a poult on the head afore this noight's over. Ef yez are ther gang Oi think, ye'd cut me throat fur a tinth part ov that."

The shrewd rejoinder was in a tone that betokened no fear, and it aroused no anger. He took the money nonchalantly and stowed it away.

"With any one else it might be so; but we think you can keep all you get. And anyway we want to use you and your friends and give you at the same time all the profits of the game."

"Moighty liberal yez are."

"We can afford to be. That five hundred is an earnest of the scale on which we do business."

"Perhaps you think we have put ourselves in your power, or at least given you the chance to find us out. Any attempt at that will be fruitless. Not one of us has ever been seen to enter this house. Others who have been are either above suspicion or are men we don't care how soon you drop upon. They know nothing; and we are no friends of theirs."

"Phat kind of story are yez givin' me? Come to ther pint er I'll be waltzin' off, five centuries an' all."

"Don't be in such haste. We will give you something solid enough before we get through. First, a little as to your past. You are not an Irishman at all. You are English born, and a graduate of the London swell mob, though before that you mixed with a class of people far above your station. You committed a forgery, for which your only punishment was being driven away by those with whom you had associated. After that you thieved and gambled, and when a score of lesser crimes had been successfully committed, you killed a gentleman while attempting a burglary, and left the country."

"On this side of the 'herring pond' your career has been longer and, if anything, more vicious and more successful. We have the proofs of at least one murder that you commit-

ted, for which an innocent man was condemned to death; and we know that for the last three months you have been the leading spirit in a band of desperate highwaymen and burglars, who would only have committed more crimes had they seen the opportunity. For everything I have said we have the proof. Does it not strike you that, to a certain extent at least, you are in our power?"

The question was one given for an answer; and the answer came, quiet and cool:

"Sure an' it's a brave mon yez are to say that ye know that much about Paddy the Piper. When a mon knows that much, it's about toime fur him to go live wid the worrums. Maybe it's thrue—an' maybe it ain't. Phat av it?"

"This: I too have been at the head of a gang. Where you have made a dollar, we have made our hundreds. We knew where to strike; you did not. For various reasons, it is advisable for us to retire from business for a time, and it is just as necessary that the business should go on. Copper Sile's place will be closed on you, but we will furnish you another headquarters, will direct the movements as far as need be, and you will do the work as it has been done, keeping all the profits. Of course this will be a matter that you will keep to yourself. What say you?"

"S'posin' Oi say no—phat sort av a racket d' yez think Oi'd foind mesilf in?"

"A very uncomfortable one, Patrick. We hold your life in our hands, and I have no hesitation in saying that we will make it uncomfortably warm for you in this world; and the heat won't be apt to be lower in the next. We've got you, and by fair means or foul we mean to keep you."

"Thin Oi'll coom down. Show me the worruk, an' Oi'll show yez ther hands to do it. Ef Oi can't do oz neat a job ez Captain Sandbag, call me a fool an' be done wid it."

"Done, then! We will give you work, and for a little that we want done on our own account—though it will benefit you as well—we are willing to give you an extra five hundred. There is a man who, while he lives, is a danger both to you and us. He must be removed. We have tried it twice and failed. It may be dangerous for us to try it again. Are you afraid to take the risk?"

"Afraid av phat? No two-legged mon ever soaked Paddy ther Piper's sand. Tell me his name."

"That is easier said than done. He has a dozen; but he is the man that personated you before the chief of police; he is the escaped, convicted felon known as Craig Clayton; and in the garb of Septimus Wardlaw, a detective, he is on our trail. Make no mistake. He must die, or you will."

"Begorra, yez needn't try ter shtir me up on him. I m'ane ter shtrike him fur all I'm worruth widout yer tellin' me. Wasn't Oi after him ter-noight? P'int him out till me an' ye'll see him drop; but fur ther loife av me Oi can't foind where he hangs out. But Oi've heard on him."

"Neither can we find him; but you must."

"An' ef yez can't foind him, how kin Oi? Be raysonable. P'int him out an' he must die; but till yez does I wouldn't swear I could do anything to help yez about him, though it's ther foive hundred extry I'd loike ter have main well. Give me toime enough an' Oi'll shtroke him sure enough, ef he don't draw us inter ther nit foorst."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A silvery laugh was the answer to his earnest words—a laugh that surprised him, since it was that of a woman; and surprised the others, since it seemed so out of place.

"You fools, you," said the clear voice of Madam Velvet, as she stepped forward. "What would become of you if it was not for a woman's wits? Throw a light on this man, and show him up as he is."

"What does yez m'ane?" was the bold answer, as a glare of light suddenly streamed on the fictitious Irishman.

"I mean that I have a cocked revolver leveled at your head, and if you move, you die. You may be Paddy the Piper, and the greatest villain unhung, but all the same you are Craig Clayton, the self-styled detective, and our most deadly foe."

And at her announcement, made with such certainty, a snarling shout went up, and a dozen other weapons glittered, as a wall of blades closed in around him.

CHAPTER XV.

AND GOES MOREOVER.

THERE could be no doubt about the danger of his position, and little hope that he could disprove the charge; but the fictitious Paddy never winced at the sight of the dozen blades.

"So you've found me out, have you? It does take a woman to see the bottom of all things. Well, supposing I am Craig Clayton—what are you going to do about it? Shoot, I suppose. All right. Begin the racket as soon as you choose, but before the ball opens I can tell you I hold the lives of a good half-dozen of you, unless the madam can shoot straighter and quicker than I think she will. And when the noise begins the police will break in. They're just outside wait-

ing for the signal. I saw them scattered around as I came in, but I thought that was your business, not mine. Don't all speak at once, but somebody lay down the programme."

Was he speaking the truth?

It was hard to tell.

At all events it seemed so likely that there was a momentary hesitation. He knew well enough that the men there were more afraid of having a clearly defined suspicion cast upon them than a thousand ordinary burglars. It was Madam Velvet that answered him.

"What do we intend to do? Why, my dear fellow, I'll tell you. We may not do it to-night, or even to-morrow; but sooner or later we mean to hand you over to the law and let justice take its course. You can harm no one here with any story that you may tell; and there are a thousand ways by which you can be brought under the noose without our agency coming to the surface. That is what we mean to do. How do you like the picture?"

"Thanks; but the course of the law is very uncertain, and you seem to forget that you have to-night revealed to me the true criminal, who can and will be made to stand in my place. It was worth all the risks I have run for me to have learned that much, and I suspect that one day you will furnish me the proofs. My visit here has not been altogether a failure, you will admit that."

"We admit nothing," snarled the madam, angry to the teeth at the cool, masterful way in which he attempted to face the situation.

"If a bullet has not ended your bravado it is because we prefer to save you for the rope. Hold up your hands now. I have been keeping you covered; it is time that we put you where you can do us no harm."

The barrel of her revolver did indeed point straight at him, and a single pressure of the finger would finish the argument in a very practical way; but she had to do with a man of wonderful nerve, who answered her order with a mocking laugh.

"Ha, ha, my dear. I have no desire to depart this life, and I have no doubt about your being in dead earnest; but all the same, I won't obey. Try your hand first; and if you miss, the rest of you can stand from under. I won't fight till I have to; but when I do it will be a fight to kill."

His hands were in the side pocket of his sack-coat; and there was no trouble in understanding his warning. He meant just what he said. The fact that he had Madam Velvet lined and yet refrained from shooting was an evidence that he did not want to force the war, and that he must have some plan for an amicable arrangement.

Madam Velvet's voice lowered.

"One word in confidence with you before we proceed to the last extremity," said the madam, coldly. "It may be that I am mistaken. Dare you speak with me alone? Remove one doubt and it is possible that we may not be so wide apart. It is a personal matter between you and me, that I must know."

"Fire ahead. You can't make the box worse and it may be bettered. It's money I'm after."

She lowered the revolver, while with the free hand she waved the others back.

"As you will," said the former spokesman, in a deep tone; and the circle fell away, leaving the daring man puzzled to know what would be the next move.

"You know my hatred of Raven—do you know the reason for it; and knowing it are you for him or me?"

The words barely reached his ears; the tones were low and confidential.

"I know your secret," responded the detective, speaking as guardedly, and in his earnestness advancing a step or two, his hands still held down.

"Then keep it!" exclaimed Madam Velvet, in a tone of triumph, at the same time suddenly dropping to the floor as the short, dull report of a derringer echoed through the place; and Wardlaw firing as he went disappeared from sight; the trap through which he had fallen closing again after him with a sudden snap.

Up from the floor sprang the woman.

"That settles him," she said, coldly. "It takes a long head and a strong hand to play against us."

She was silent after that, standing in a listening attitude; and the rest held their peace wonderfully well. Nothing could be heard but the faint sound of suppressed breathing.

"Our thanks to you," said the spokesman at length, in relieved tones. "He was no fool to handle, and used his tools like a border ruffian. If you had not dodged that shot there would have been a vacancy in the ranks. He has changed in his checks now, though; and the first thing to do is to try and find out if there has been treachery here, and who is the guilty party."

"How—why—what do you mean?"

Half a dozen voices spoke at once; some indignant, some curious, some frightened.

"I mean that the madam and I hit upon a discovery that none of the rest appear to have dreamed of. That man was an impostor. The real man we wanted has not been here at all.

Yet this one came posted in all the signs. Has Paddy the Piper played us false, or are we to look for the trouble at home? I had been biding my time. Since the moment I recognized that we were being played with I decided that the man should never leave this place alive. Yet I had my doubts how to get rid of him without somebody standing the chance of a last sickness. The madam fortunately was equal to the emergency, and drew him over the trap as no one else could have done. What has become of the original is a question that I leave you two to settle. It is time now that the conclave broke up."

He pointed to two of the nearest men, and then gave a wave of his hand. Amazed by their late experience, the members of the band were in no mood to hesitate. There was a sharp clap given by each pair of hands present; then, one at a time, they began to fall away and retire into the darkness, until only the leader and Madam Velvet were left.

"Remain with me, Conyngham," said the woman, in a low tone. You and I must have some further conversation over this matter. You have the most of all to lose, and there is no disguising the fact that we are in some danger."

"Be quick then. If there was any truth in what he said about the place being watched, the sooner we get to the other side of the block, the better."

"Yes. But first it would be better to satisfy ourselves that he is really gone. A tumble through a trap-door does not always kill."

"What can you see? If he's not dead, he's out in the bay by this time. The tide was just right to carry him along. You can see nothing there if you looked for a week."

He spoke impatiently, for Madam Velvet had opened the side of a dark lantern, and was peering downward through the again opened trap. The drop was not deep, but below she could see only a narrow chute, and the sluggish water of the tide.

"Ah, I believe I am safe," she said, with a sigh of relief. "I was horribly afraid, I can tell you, for, however much he was in the dark about the rest, that man knew me."

Conyngham gave a short laugh.

"How careful we are of our own precious blood and bones. And yet, if that fool spoke the truth, we are in some danger yet. If the police don't break in, as he threatened, it is pretty certain that they saw him come in. If they don't see him go out there may be unpleasant questions asked."

"That is provided for. They cannot find their way here in a week—they will find a path that leads right through to—nowhere, in the next street. I only hope they have a clear idea of what he looks like."

"Why so? You seem mighty anxious that they should have us down fine."

"Not at all. The real man will be about soon enough, and be recognized. If they pull him, he dare say nothing on his own account; and if he did speak, it is precious little that he could say. It may, indeed, be necessary to find him and temporarily give him away if he, for any reasons of his own, is in hiding."

"You have a long head, and there is a heap of consolation in the plan. But, meantime, this *faux pas* unhinges the scheme in regard to our chestnuts. What is best to be done? There is no disguising the fact, that the efforts to unravel the mystery of our little stock operations are as tremendous as they are quiet. We have of late made a failure or two that has somewhat shaken my nerve; if they keep on, who knows what may happen? We must close out; but do it without a chance for a breath of suspicion. I tell you, a single word might fire the mine."

"Perhaps it would have been as well to have thought of all that when the league was formed," responded Madam Velvet, coolly. "I have been your blind instrument—a very trenchant tool, I have proved. I have asked no questions, and if I was disposed to do so this minute, I could tell nothing that would really identify you and your gang. If you have been as successful with the rest, you are safe from internal treachery, unless by a pitfall into which those betrayed are deliberately led; but, meantime, who is to trust you?"

"Ha, ha! I wonder if you have not been making some inquiries about a certain Captain Conyngham. It is certain that others have done so, if you have not. And the captain remains as much a myth as ever. I intend it shall be so to the end of the chapter. You heard a man say that he intended to take a trip across the ocean. He will not go. No one will go at present. Together the Gilt Edge Gang sinks or swims. Among a million people a single individual is not so easy to find."

"Unless you know where to look for him."

"And are willing to run the risks attendant on looking," he said seriously. "Don't forget that you have certain skeletons of your own, that it would be neither safe nor pleasant to unveil to the public eye. You can have no hold on me; but I have on you a dozen. Don't force me to use them."

"Thank you for the warning; but I shall be able to protect myself. One word more. You

heard what was said to-night about Alvah Wharton's money. Where is it? How much was it? Why has no division yet been made?"

"Ask no questions. That was a matter arranged before you came into the conclave; the less you know about it the better. Enough that I am willing to tell you that Alvah Wharton's money is nowhere. Either we made a mistake, or he was shrewd enough to put it where even we could not find it. I have not given up altogether; should it be found you will have your share."

The two had talked as though they might doubt each other; but now the stronger wish of the man seemed to prevail, and in a different tone Madam Velvet answered:

"Perhaps you are right. At least I will trust you—all the more readily because I am powerless to do anything else. Nevertheless I feel danger in the air, and I will not be reassured until I have an explanation of this night's mystery. Will you let me know when you discover it, why and how the man that went through the trap found his way into our meeting?"

"I will. Now let us make our way out. There is little danger after all. He was simply a lying braggart."

Perhaps.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MADAM MAKES A CONFIDANT.

THE madam was very right in saying that a fall through a trap did not always kill. At the moment she was peering downward through the trap the victim was so near, that his voice, had it been raised, could have reached her ears.

He had nothing to say, though, for he had fallen into hands that knew how to manage him thoroughly well. When the trap slipped away from under him he had pulled his triggers as he dropped, and the roar of his pistols drowned the "chug" he made as he struck the water.

He thought it a blessing that he did not stick in the mud which he felt as he touched bottom. Luck was in his favor so far that he came to the top like a cork.

In a blind sort of way he swam a few strokes; then he felt a stout gripe on his shoulder, and without any resistance he was dragged into a boat, which, for some mysterious reason, was right at the spot.

There was a lighted lantern sitting in the bow, but it was through hearing his voice rather than through any aid the lantern gave that he recognized Big Mike, the man he had last seen at Copper Sile's.

With a companion of the same stripe Mike was waiting there, and if he had any object in view that object seemed to be accomplished when the self-appointed detective fell into their hands, for they lingered no longer. With a grunt of satisfaction Mike laid the helpless captive down in the boat, and then the two pushed away with noiseless celerity.

The distance was not far from the river—of that Wardlaw was well aware—but he could not guess within half a dozen or more piers of the spot where they shot out into the starlight.

"I reckon you ain't goin' ter try ter kick up a row with us," said Big Mike, bending over. "Ef ther cops takes us they'll find you in ther same boat, an' of ther three you'd be ther wu'st off. You jest lay low till yer time comes. We ain't goin' ter turn yer toes up this time."

Howard could make no answer, but as he lay perfectly quiet it was to be supposed that he acquiesced in these views. Very true it was that he wanted to have as little as possible to do with the police; and he even remembered that if Mike knew as much about him as he hinted that he did, it would be easy enough for him to assume the role of captor, and lay claim to the reward offered for Craig Clayton. That might be his game anyhow. To find out it was only necessary to wait and learn.

For some little distance the men rowed along in a quiet, skillful way. Then Mike, apparently vexed at himself for a temporary forgetfulness, pulled out an old handkerchief.

"Say, young feller, it clean skipped my mind, but I was to bring yer 'round in such a way that yer couldn't see which way you were goin'. Don't be skeered now. I'll hev ter clap on a rag as'll shut ther light out. Then, that orter fix ther thing up, first chop. Mebbe you'll come out when ther circus are over; an' mebbe you won't. Any way, this won't make no differens'. Ef it doos, come an' see me an' you'll find me on hand."

Big Mike might have an idea as to who his prisoner was, but it was pretty evident that he did not recognize him as the little man who knocked him down at Copper Sile's. Had he done so he might not have been in such a cruel good-humor.

But there was something more to follow.

A peculiar but familiar odor reached the young man's nostrils.

He made what fight he could, but of course to no purpose. Chloroform did its work, and in a few moments he had lapsed into insensibility.

"That settles him," said Mike, in a satisfied tone. "Only, I order done it sooner. He can't tell where he's goin' to, but mebber he kin tell where he came from, ef that will do him any good."

"But who is he, Mike? Don't yer think there's somethin' crooked 'bout this yere? Tell yer, I'd sooner put his chunk out an' done with it. How did he happen ter kim tumblin' through jest when we were 'round? Who hangs out up above? I ain't skeerier than ther next man, but I likes ter know ther kind ov a game I'm goin' inter afore they begins ter deal off ther keards."

"Dry up, Jinks. I told yer ther' war a job ter be did, an' I paid yer ther chink right down. Good ernuf; what more d'yer want? I'm runnin' this rag, an' ef yer don't like ter see me throwin' double sixes I'll row in ter shore an' you kin pull out—an' mind yer eye ther next time I meet you. Ther pal ez goes back on me ketches it hot when I git my hands empty."

"Oh, I ain't a-pullin' out; an' I ain't goin' back on yer. Ther only thing ar' ez I war a-sayin'. But s'pose ther cops come swoopin' along, an find what looks mighty like a stiff layin' 'round. They'd take us right in."

"Cops be hanged! We kin dodge 'em, can't we? An' ef ther' ain't no chance we'll jest take mister man by ther legs an let him inter ther water soft-like, an' leave him there. I ain't riskin' me own neck, an you kin bet yer bottom dollar I ain't askin' you ter resk yourn."

This partial explanation seemed to prove satisfactory. A murder more to add to his conscience-list did not trouble Jinks half as much as being actually taken by the police, in a suspicious position. The boat went rapidly on.

When Howard returned to his senses he found himself once more on *terra firma*. The rag had been removed from his face, and he had a chance to see, by a feebly-burning lamp, that he was in a cramped, squalid apartment, and from the feel of the atmosphere he divined that it was part of a cellar.

He looked around him once more, and more sharply. The mist was beginning to clear away from his brain, and now there was a gleam of recognition in his eye.

"What sort of luck is this? I'm on my own stamping-grounds again, and if they give me half a chance I'll fool them yet. If I can't walk, maybe I can roll; and if I can roll far enough and reach high enough, I'll leave a mystery to solve at their leisure."

Acting in accordance with his soliloquy, he rolled over, and felt so encouraged that there was a smile of content on his face. Why he had been brought there he could not guess, though he doubted if his life was in danger. Certainly it would have been easier to have left him in the sewer, or dropped him into the river.

As he raised himself up into a sitting posture, he heard the sound of a light laugh, and became aware of the fact that he was no longer alone. The door had opened noiselessly, and some one had glided into the room.

"Don't, please don't!" said a languid voice, that was not at all unfamiliar. "I know you are a young man of resources, and doubtless have some schemes afoot; but really I couldn't afford to lose you now, after all the trouble I have taken."

"Madam Velvet!" exclaimed Clayton, in some surprise.

"I was not mistaken, when I said you knew me," answered the madam. "You evidently are a very wise man, even if you did put your head in the lion's mouth, and you cannot wonder at it that I decided at once that it was necessary that you should die. Self-preservation, you understand—of course you cannot blame me for tumbling

you through the trap, which was provided for such emergencies."

"But if you want to kill me, how does it come that I am here?"

"Why, are you not dead? I certainly saw you drop down through a roadway, which no one ever came back to try a second time. There was not a man there that did not heave a sigh of relief when you permanently disappeared, even if you took their money with you. And now you are thinking of returning to the beggarly vanities of the cruel world. Why should you be so foolish?"

There was a careless mockery about the speaker that did not at all tend to put the young man at his ease, though it was not hard for him to understand that he was brought there for a purpose. He could even see that the woman was studying his face sharply while she spoke.

"Other people who fell through the trap did not find a boat waiting below to take them out of danger. If the boat was placed there to receive me, then the events of the night were all planned, and for a purpose. Who planned them, and for what reason?"

"Ah! you can understand that much, can you? Very well—I planned them. I did not know of, and I do not yet understand the substitution, nor do I believe that a mistake was made in arranging for a meeting with the wrong man. Whichever came would have been in the same danger, since the man you represented is viewed with distrust, and it is only within the last twenty-four hours that it has become known that Craiglaw Howard Clayton not only still lives but is meddling with affairs that do not concern him. I had arranged to save the man known as Paddy the Piper; but now that it has turned out as it has, I am all the better satisfied. You are a better man than he, and now I want you!"

"For what?" asked Clayton, still a little astonished, though he had already suspected something of the kind.

"To hunt down, to the death if needs be, the men known as the Gilt Edge Gang, and most of all, their leader."

"But their leader—who is he? I assure you I have no love for the villains; but I have never yet been able to learn who it was that directed the movements of that extraordinary band of criminals, though I made a long step to-night toward it."

So far she had left him a bound prisoner; now she quietly applied a knife to his cords.

"Do not become too suddenly brave. In spite of what you said to-night, I can shoot very straight. And if I miss, I have a couple of my brave supporters in ambush who would drop you at the first sign of treachery. They can see, but I do not intend them to hear; so lower your voice, sir, and listen. In the first place, can I trust you?"

"Better when you know that I am sure I can trust you. What guarantee have I that you do not intend my death so soon as you have learned what you can of my plans?"

"Only the guarantee of a woman who, while at variance with the law, hates the criminal she has spoken of with a volcanic hatred. You said once to-night that you knew my secret. If you told the truth what need for me to say more?"

"I begin to believe. I swear to you that I never will betray you so far as anything goes that you tell me to-night in good faith. More than that I cannot promise until I know more."

He spoke frankly, and without the semblance of fear. The woman seemed to be struck by his tones.

"You are both cool and brave," she said, in a low voice.

"I have need to be," he answered. "A man condemned to the gallows, who has successfully evaded the power of the police, urged on by unlimited wealth, must be either cool or go under. I am living yet in spite of them; and I expect to live until I have reversed the verdict of the law, and can once more walk in the open light of day, a free man."

While they spoke the two were studying each other. Evidently each was afraid to trust and yet wished to. It was still the woman that pushed on the overtures.

"I can help you, perhaps, more than you dream of. You heard to-night who the real

criminal was, for whom you were condemned to suffer. I do not wish to deceive you. He and the chief of the Gilt Edge Gang are not the same; yet to succeed you must strike both. Until to-night I never knew who the other was. Chance revealed it."

"And now you know? Who is it then?"

"Swear to me to aid me to hunt him down. I will put in your hands the machinery I can direct, if you can handle it better than I; but you must swear to me to use it."

"I swear. I too begin to see light ahead."

"The chief is known to me by the name of Conyngham; but his real name is Raven—Edgar Raven. Under that name he wronged me as fearfully as man can wrong a woman. I vowed then to hunt him to death; but I looked for him in vain. He has a thousand disguises, and is perfect in all of them. It was only by chance that he let the mask drop for a moment; but in that moment I recognized him—not as one man, but as three. He was posing then as a certain General Rawle, late from the far East."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Clayton, deeply moved.

"Not impossible, but the very truth. To-night I discovered that he and Conyngham were one. I struck one blow at him to-night—and failed. Now I must use more caution. If he strikes first he will crush me. At best it means ruin for me; but what care I if he goes down with me. As General Rawle he cannot be reached, but as Conyngham he is ready for the gallows. In that character I want you to hunt him down. You can reach him, perhaps, through an agent of mine I think I can trust, but you must run your risks. Will you dare them?"

"I will," answered the young man, and he extended his hand, which Madam Velvet clasped.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE HOTEL MYSTERY DEEPENS.

THE messenger sent to summon Preston Blaine had returned unsuccessful. Through some inscrutable chance he met no one who would tell him where the gallant major had his lair. Four evenings out of seven, he would have been hard to miss; but this, of course, was a special occasion, and he was specially invisible. It was provoking.

But the fact was, that having handed in several interviews, and plenty of other matter, the major had felt relieved from the necessity of further duty, and had gone to his room, at what was, for him, an early hour. The first intimation he had of what had happened was through the columns of a morning paper.

He looked the paper over as a matter of business, but almost at first glance his eye fell upon something that held him with a shocked, breathless interest, for the headlines told him where the mysterious murder had taken place, and a line or two more revealed who it was that the stroke had fallen upon.

For an instant or two his face was deathly white.

"Murdered! My heavens, I cannot believe it! Yesterday all health, life and beauty. To-day a corpse. Strangled in her bed, found there by her father. What a shock to the general. The maid missing—perhaps murdered too. Who are the guilty parties? The Gilt Edge Gang, I'll take my oath. I'll hunt them *now*, if it brings me to my coffin."

Preston Blaine's teeth closed with an angry snap. He had fought hard in his time, and after the first burst of sorrowful regret the combative in his nature came to the front, along with a good share of the vindictive. Though he felt for the general, yet it was in a hazy sort of way.

He gave the paper another glance.

"Marks of a strong hand on her throat. No robbery known to have taken place. No clew. Police at fault. General broke down after trying to keep up, and refuses to see any one. I must go to him at once. It wants a wild Indian on this trail."

He had been sitting at a table in a restaurant, having nearly finished his breakfast before he took out the paper he had purchased previous to entering. Having paid his bill he went hastily out and in a very short time was sending in his card to General Rawle, following it in person a moment later.

Rawle was reclining on a lounge but arose languidly at sight of his younger friend.

"I've changed terribly since I last saw you; I'm a hundred years older. Of course you have seen it all."

Preston Blaine said nothing. He simply bowed his head and held out his hand.

The general *was* changed—more than he had thought possible, though not so much overwhelmed as the major had anticipated.

"I sent for you last night, but somehow they could not find you, and I had nothing to do but wait. Now that you have come, I feel indeed that something will be done. Until I feel better able to face the world I want to put everything in your hands."

"A thousand thanks for your confidence—I wish I was more worthy of it. I am too shocked to be quite myself. Have the police found no clew?"

"The police!"

The voice of the general for a moment rose to a wrathful pitch.

They are blind as mules. When my head clears a little, I may see straight myself; but then it will be too late. They profaned Regina's room with their presence, stared at her poor, crushed throat, and then said—they would see. There was one man here, a private detective, of whom I have more hope than of all the rest. He looked over the ground in a cool, business-like way, demanded no money, expressed no doubt, but went off to work even when I tried to detain him.

Somehow I know that he is my man for a thousand. I am to meet him to-day—you will go with me—and then we will know what to do."

"A private detective? The class will bear watching. Who was he?"

"There is his card. Wardlaw is the name, I believe."

"I don't know him—by that name," answered Blaine, slowly. The unexpected coolness of his friend had had its effect on him, and he was able to think. His voice had even got back something of its customary music.

"This man is honest; I would stake my life on it. Why, what risk is there?"

Sure enough, what risk could there be? But while he was speaking a letter came up from the office, addressed in a neat, business-like hand, though its contents caused consternation, since they gave not only voice but shape to the very doubts that Blaine had hinted at.

"DEAR SIR:—Last night a man claiming to be a detective, introduced himself to you under the assumed name of Wardlaw. The writer, who, for certain reasons, requests that this communication remain a secret, warns you to be on your guard, should he appear to you under that or any other guise. He is none other than Craig Clayton, a convicted but escaped murderer. As he has been recognized under his disguise, it is not likely that he will trouble you again. Should he do so, you will be conferring a favor on humanity and the law by taking him to the nearest station, and informing them who he is. I guarantee the warmth of his reception. Respectfully,
"YOUR FRIEND,"

"What sort of vile net-work is this around me? Read this, Blaine, and see if I have made out its contents aright."

The major read—and knitted his brows.

"I suppose that is a specimen of what professional rivalry leads to. Perhaps this Wardlaw is no worse than your anonymous correspondent; but it would be at least unpleasant to feel that your dependence was on that kind of a man."

"I cannot help it; in some way he impressed me favorably. If ever this nightmare mystery is to be solved, he is the man that will do it. Perhaps he may still make his promised appointment. Surely he must have learned something. If I hear from him you must go with me. Perhaps you can recognize him, and tell me whether it will be safe to trust to him."

A telegraph messenger interrupted the answer. General Rawle hastily tore open the envelope.

The message was dated at Albany.

"Madam V. out of town. On track. Wait for developments. WARDLAW."

The two looked at each other, and both together voiced the one word:

"Strange."

While they hesitated there came another visitor, who entered with visible reluctance. He seemed to be a perfect stranger to the general, but Preston Blaine took his hand at first sight.

"Captain Hardy! Ah! I might have guessed that you would be around. At last we have some one on whom we can rely."

"Yes, yes," answered Hardy. "I will do my best for any friend of yours; but I want to tell you before other things drive it out of my mind, I have just got track, fairly and squarely, of one Craig Clayton, who escaped after conviction of murder long ago, and who has lately been masquerading as one Wardlaw, a private detective. He is Paddy the Piper; and he is chief of the Gilt Edge Gang."

"We have him, then," said Blaine, excitedly. "If you can only keep your knowledge from leaking out. I see it all, now. They did the crime here, and he came afterward to see that all was properly covered up. General Rawle, the chances are even that you were speaking to the murderer himself. How far he would trail his associates you can guess. Yet he is not done with you, and if he thinks his incognito has not been interfered with he will meet you. Their plans must include you and perhaps the gentleman down-stairs. I'll wager that this warning—"

"Wait a moment, major. One thing at a time. About this man down-stairs. You don't seem to have the latest."

"The latest—no. What is it?"

"He has disappeared. I came here for a double purpose—intending also to get some information from him, if possible, in regard to his adventures last night. From what I hear they must have been remarkable. I suppose he objects to having his name go before the public, and has dodged reporters, police and everybody else."

"Perhaps he too has been murdered," suggested Blaine, solemnly.

"I would not undertake to say. It was only by chance I heard of him, and I do not even know his name. Do you?"

Blaine was forced to admit that he did not. About all the information he could give was that he was a gentleman in appearance, and so much resembling General Rawle that not being able to see clearly the battered features he had at first taken him to be indeed his friend. He had found nothing to indicate serious damage, and after washing him up had left him in charge of a porter.

Hardy stroked the side of his nose thoughtfully as he listened to the brief story. Probably he had his own views of the importance of the matter, and possibly he would have ventilated them had there not come an interruption.

A young woman, evidently in a high state of excitement, forced her way into the room, exclaiming:

"Oh, is it true that Miss Rawle has been murdered? and please tell me what has become of Lizzie? I want my sister."

CHAPTER XVIII.

PRESTON BLAINE STRIKES A TRAIL THAT ENDS NOWHERE.

THE appearance of the young woman at General Rawle's rooms was evidently a surprise to every one.

The general gazed doubtfully at her, a puzzled look in his eyes.

"Pardon me, my young friend, but at such a moment I scarcely feel equal to an interview with a stranger. Can you not go away for the present? If you will leave your address, I will do myself the honor of looking further into your affairs if you desire it. Just now it is hard enough for me to keep my head clear for matters that most nearly concern myself."

"But your affairs are mine. I saw it all in the papers this morning—about Miss Regina; and then I knew something had happened to Lizzie. Don't keep it back, but let me know the whole truth. What is it?"

"You seem very much in earnest, but, my dear child, I do not understand you altogether. Who are you? Unless I am wofully mistaken, I never saw your face before. How then can I tell what to answer?"

"But Lizzie is my sister. The paper does not say anything about her, and I know something has happened."

"And who is Lizzie?" asked Captain Hardy, stepping forward.

"Lizzie, I suppose," responded Blaine, taking the labor of replying from his chief, "was Miss Rawle's maid, and perhaps, after a sort, her companion. Unfortunately, she was away last night, visiting her relatives.

Had she been here I feel sure that there would have been an alarm—perhaps the fiends would have been captured."

"But she was not at home," broke in the girl. "She never came. Oh! I am sure they have killed her, too!"

"This becomes more and more serious," said Hardy, coming positively to the front. "Have you any suspicion that any one could have an interest in her death? I must say I cannot believe that harm of that kind could have happened to her, though the coincidence is striking. Tell me, was she handsome? There are other dangers than death. It is even possible that she has gone away willingly. Give me a description, and, if possible, a photograph of her. I will have every precinct notified. It is harder for a woman to vanish than you might think; and it is almost certain that if any foul play has been attempted it will give us a clew to the mystery. Where can I find you?"

The appearance of the police captain had a wonderfully quieting effect on the girl. It might be that it was reassuring, and then again it might be that it caused her to hold her tongue for another and a very good reason.

The general spoke for her now, as Preston Blaine had just done.

"Pardon me, Hardy, for leaving the poor girl to speak for herself. I was as much unhinged as she was, or I would have understood sooner. I can give you all the points you may need. You see I have to shake myself together every minute or so. Her coming seems really providential. I should have a woman with us. Every one has been very kind; but we cannot depend on that. You will stay with me will you not, until after the funeral?"

"And you will be looking for Lizzie all the same?"

"Certainly. Do not think I had forgotten her. She was so much in my thoughts that even last night I wanted to go in search of her. It was a pity that no one knew where she could be found. Poor Regina would have known."

"I will stay, then, and you will find me no coward. Maybe as you say, you can find me a way out of my own trouble, while I am helping you in yours. Take me to the—to the body."

A few moments later the young stranger was installed as watcher, while the men were gathered together in a consultation which promised to produce results of importance, Captain Hardy did not linger longer than was necessary to obtain what information the two could give him, and went away pondering over the mystery of the singular murder, which the revelations of the general only appeared to deepen.

Blaine remained for a little while; and now that he and Rawle were alone together in the darkened, quiet room his spirit sunk away below zero. He was too anxious to get out and to work, not to be depressed; and as the general noticed it, and urged upon him not to linger through any good-feeling toward him, he finally went away.

The day passed without any startling discoveries, the lonely occupant of the room spending most of his time writing, and looking over the papers that were kept filed away in a small trunk that he brought from his bedroom.

As night came on he evidently grew restless, and about nine o'clock he gave a few directions to the watchers with the corpse, to whom he had hardly spoken during the day and then went quietly out.

No one about the house appeared to notice his going, and without hesitation he walked away, with the air of one anxious to leave the spot behind him.

For an aimless stroller he certainly went very straight, and was in remarkable luck to find a hack drawn up near the curb, around the corner from the hotel, into which he could vanish, after a careful look around him.

If the general imagined that he had entered it unperceived he was very much mistaken. On the opposite corner stood a young man with keen eyes and a determined looking face, who was evidently surprised to see him, and more than half inclined to speak to him. When the hack started at a rapid pace Preston Blaine, moved by a sudden impulse, followed it. He had only a fleeting glance,

but he was sure that he had not been mistaken.

And there was some one else with an eye on the general, as Blaine had the chance to see. A boy ran silently and fleetly out from the shadows, and sprung up behind. The question was whether it was some street urchin, who was bent only upon stealing a ride; or whether it was some one on the track of the party inside.

If the major had not been anxious to find out himself it is likely that such an idea would never have entered his head; but feeling, as he did, that he was guilty of some want of faith toward his friend, it made him suspicious of the rest of the world.

And then the detective fever was doubly strong within him, since the murder of the night before. There was a possibility of something developing out of this chance meeting. Being light of foot, and in fair training, he managed to keep up for some distance.

Then, when the speed had been accelerated and several turnings made that caused him to think it barely possible that the driver was trying to discount pursuit, the vehicle, which had drawn well ahead of him, suddenly vanished.

There was no great mystery about what had happened. A well dressed young man like himself would attract more attention than was pleasant if he went racing along the sidewalk at a dead run. He was simply out-paced from start to finish.

"Confound it!" he muttered. "They're gone, sure enough; and that's the last I'll see of them, to-night. I didn't even have gumption enough to hollow out to cut behind. That boy will be with them when they stop; and if it's for any bad purpose I'll never forgive myself. I should have run on at all hazards and taken him off anyhow. In Hardy's hands who knows what he might not have divulged?"

The more he thought of it the more was Blaine excited and perplexed. He thrust his hands in his pockets, bent his head down, and walked on, rapidly but aimlessly.

He had no idea of the lapse of time, either. When he looked up with a start as a carriage drifted past him it certainly was not that he thought he had any interest in it. He would not have recognized it had there not been a boy hanging on behind. Chance had again directed his footsteps, and once more he had his quarry in sight.

When he could see the boy again he was not half so anxious to haul him from his perch; or even to cry out, cut behind. At the leisurely pace the horses were going, it was not difficult to keep well up without exciting suspicion; and it struck him that it would be more interesting to follow on to the end.

While he was turning this over in his mind, every sense being now on the alert, the hack drew up to the curb, just far enough ahead of him to have a fair view of the individual that immediately sprung out.

Preston Blaine could not restrain a gesture of impatience.

The man was a perfect stranger; a stout gentleman with light hair and blonde beard, who stepped with an air of conscious ownership toward the nearest building, which was evidently the residence of some one of means and respectability.

Blaine waited in vain for the appearance of General Rawle. The driver spoke sharply to his horses, and the conveyance was whisked away without delay.

The major had his choice of two suppositions.

Perhaps Rawle had been taken up by the gentleman with the light beard for the sake of a brief business conversation.

In that case he might have got down again long before Blaine had again struck the trail.

Or he might still be in the carriage.

The major gave a hasty glance at the house, and then followed on. It took a minute to lose track of the conveyance; and a minute more to remember that the boy had disappeared as well. He wheeled, then, and hastened back, but by that time the street was empty, for at least a block. Thoroughly disgusted, he hurried away.

When he had turned the nearest corner going toward Broadway, the boy came to the surface again, and stepping boldly up to the

doorway rung the bell, somewhat after a curious fashion.

In a minute or less the door opened; after the briefest of parleys it closed again—with the boy on the inside.

CHAPTER XIX.

A PROTEAN DRAMA.

As the boy entered the hall the door swung shut behind him.

"Now, then," said a sharp, quick voice, "what do you want with Judge Wetherington? He is busy to-night—just back from the country—and can't be bothered. I've turned away several callers, and I let you in to get out of sight of them. If you have any word give it to me and I'll take it in, while you go about your business."

"The word I've got for him he hears from me, and nobody else. You take my card in if you don't want to get yourself into trouble, and maybe him too."

The man gave a short laugh. The idea of a boy such as this talking about his card! It was ridiculous—and yet there might be something in it. First his face wore a grim smile, and then it lengthened into an air of respectful attention.

"Very well. If it is possible no one is ever sent away from here unattended to. Give me this card of yours and I will see what the judge has to say. If you have been funning me I pity your ears, that's all. I have you in a trap out of which you can't get until I am ready to leave you."

"You think? There's men ov your size been fooled before this," answered the boy, coolly, as he placed an envelope in the hand of the man, who turned without answer and disappeared through a neighboring door.

He came back very promptly, and there was something like a troubled tone in his voice as he spoke:

"You're a gallus little fraud, I'll put up any money; but the judge will see you. If you haven't a good reason for disturbing him, I'm going to take your hide off when you come out for bothering me; so you look a little out."

"You bet," responded the boy, serenely. "There'll be several hides off when I get through; and maybe I'll go off with your scalp in my belt. I know what I'm after."

With the saucy words lingering on his lips, the lad was ushered into the room where Judge Wetherington was seated.

"You may go now, Thomas; and see that you remain within call. It is not very likely the interview will be a long one."

The speaker was the same gentleman that Preston Blaine had seen enter the house. As he spoke he settled his spectacles on his nose and looked sternly at his visitor, while Thomas was backing out of the apartment.

When the door had closed he continued in a lower, but sharper tone:

"Now, what is it? Speak quickly. You had no business to come here and I should not have allowed you to enter, but men in my position must see everybody, even a boy. A boy may not have much influence; but there's a chance that there is behind him some one who has. Who are you?"

The boy had been watching him quite calmly, and now drew himself up in a way that showed that he was ready for war.

"Don't try any of your snide games on me—I know you clean through, and the men that are backing me can bring you to your milk if they just work their fingers. Touch me softly, judge, for I'm used to careful handling. Whenever there's a neat job to be done they shout for Tommy; and Tommy's around."

"Very well. And what does Tommy want?"

"Tommy wants to give you a pointer. We ain't all as dumb as we look, and we know you clean through. What more I want to know is, where's Captain Waite? We want him turned up; and that mighty sudden too."

"Waite, Waite! Really, you are beyond me—though, as I see many men I can hardly be expected to remember them all. Who is Captain Waite; and what have I to do with him?"

"Don't try that on, judge; it won't work. We know all about it. He's Paddy the Piper, if that will suit you any better—just as you're Captain Conyngham when you're

on a different lay. We know that he met you last night, but he never came away with you. You've set up a job on him; and if you don't play crawfish and bring him back to the waiting family, we'll set one up on you that will shake New York like an earthquake."

"You must be wild, my lad. Certainly I know no such person as Captain Waite; and so I can assure you that I did not see him last evening. And as for Paddy the Piper, if he is the same man, I don't know him in that shape either. You have come to the wrong place altogether; who sent you on such a nonsensical errand? I would like to know. Some enemy of mine I should say, though such silly stuff cannot annoy me. Clear out now, or I'll have you arrested for attempted blackmail. I know nothing of any Waite, Conyngham or Paddy the Piper."

The judge certainly kept his head very well. He showed not the slightest sign of embarrassment, and very little of anger. He was only, if anything, too cool.

If he thought to get rid of his young visitor in that manner he was very much mistaken.

"That won't do, judge. Honor among thieves. If you're on the square with him, we want to be on the square with you. If you ain't, we want to know where he went to, right now, so blow the whole game."

"Then you would be willing to crush him along with me, if I deny your right to call me to account. You're a brick, young man, but not a very bright one; and if you are a fair sample, I must say that this Captain Waite is not very fortunate in the choice of friends."

"Don't fool yourself. If we blow the whole game it's only a start for him under another face and a different name; but when you tumble, it's the smash-up of your life. I'm asking for the last time, what did you do with him?"

The boy was in dead earnest—of that there was no doubt.

Indeed he was in too much earnest for his own good. He forgot himself for an instant, and his voice, that had all along been skillfully disguised, took on the liquid tones that could only come from female lips. The judge had been eying his visitor keenly, and he did not fail to notice the change.

"Ah!" he said, "there is more here than we looked for. You are no boy. Who are you? You ought to know that when you mix in with these affairs you are running deadly risks. I know nothing of the man you speak of, but I must know something more of you before you will be allowed to go away from here. A word from me, and you spend the night in the police station."

"Or somewhere else. Men like you are don't want to call in the police when they can get around it. I'm not afraid of your trying that, but I am that you'll set up some worse job on me if you can. But don't you try it, judge. There's good men behind me. You touch me, and they will lay for you. Your gang ain't the only one that can stave a man's head in."

"And for the last time I ask you, who are you?"

"I am Lizzie Waite, and a sister to the man whom I believe you last night murdered. Now you know who I am, and who are behind me. Will you speak?"

The voice grew more earnest.

"Of course I will, my dear. So you are the missing girl. Do you know that if suspicion once gets turned in your way, it will be apt to go very hard with you? Indeed, some people are uncharitable enough to say that if the truth were known, it would be found that you had a hand in the murder of Miss Rawle. And I am afraid that this fixes it on your brother, anyhow."

"Miss Rawle? I do not understand you!"

"Of course not. But there's a Captain Hardy of the police that is looking for you all the same; and your sister Katie is taking your place by the side of the remains while they are searching for your body."

"In the name of Heaven, who is dead?"

"Miss Regina Rawle, your mistress; I saw her father a few moments ago. He and your sister are moving Heaven and earth to find you, and have enlisted the police in their service. If you have anything to conceal you

can judge whether it is best to threaten me."

"Regina dead—Katie—my sister—why this thing is false. I have no sister. There is no Katie. I have no mistress. You are trying to play on my fears and make me forget my errand. I will not go until you tell me what has become of the man you met last night."

"And I tell you, girl, that I know nothing about him; that so far as I am concerned you are altogether wrong. But I know that you are wanted, and I shall give you a chance to explain to the police the cause of your absence. I have been playing with you so far; but it has been with a purpose. By your own admission you are connected with the extraordinary ruffians known as the Gilt Edge Gang, and it has already been more than suspected that they were concerned in the crime at General Rawle's rooms. Now, the proof is patent. I hold the key to the mystery in my hand. If you are the missing girl—"

His fingers closed suddenly on her shoulder with a vicious force that she had evidently not expected.

She did not wince or cower, but looked him fearlessly in the face.

"What can you prove? Think twice before you put your own head in the noose."

"No noose will there be for me; but I'd go any length to fit one for the man or woman who murdered Regina Rawle."

"Faith, an' it's well yez may say that, jedge darlint," broke in a voice with a rich brogue, "fur be ther same token this is ther gurrul hersilf. She's fooled me wanst er twicte; but she don't do it ag'in. Frazed onto her, jedge dear, fur when we have her, we have the hub av ther ontire thing. Och, but she's a daisy, an' don't yez furgit it. Oi blamed you wid this racket they put up on me last night, an' Oi hed come to git even; but Oi say what's forninst the millstone, an' Oi'm willin' to shake hands when this ducky is put where she can't do more hurt. Phat yez starin' at? Oi'm Paddy the Piper, an' this kid's General Rawle's gurrul."

The judge appeared to be all abroad, yet it was not at the appearance of the Irishman, who had stolen in through a door opposite to that by which the disguised girl had entered. His hand loosened its gripe and he staggered back, though his eyes never once left her face.

"Regina Rawle—impossible!" he exclaimed at length; and yet there was just hesitation enough to show that he was more than half convinced, and that the knowledge was for him specially a shock.

"It's thruer than gospel. It's Lizzie thet's the dead wan, me own sister Lizzie. Betwane thim they've kilt the poor gurrul, an' I've swoor to git even. It was on you I blamed it all last night, whin they knocked me down an' toiled me up; but now Oi know it were part ov their game. Some wan came to yez in my place. Phat did yez do wid him? Answer me that. If he's livin' it's in dape danger we all are. If he's did then this daisy must folly the same road, an' we'll be safe."

"What is the bottom of this mystery?" answered the judge, passing his hand across his face in a dazed sort of way, "I know nothing about the man you both say came to me last night, and I want nothing more to do with either of you. By your own showing you are a pair of criminals; and I doubt not you are in league. Who you may be I cannot say; but this I do know. This girl is not Regina Rawle. She is dead."

"He says so," responded the girl sharply, pointing one shapely finger at Wetherington. "And he ought to know. That man is General Rawle, himself."

"Thank yez fur tellin' me. It's a p'int in my game; but it don't help you. Come, gin'ral dear, we hev yez down foine; are yez fer me or aginst me? Yez naden't be so bloody careful. She's ez good ez a dead woman. Spake roight out."

At last the judge was ready. There was the sound of the tinkling of a little bell in the adjoining room, and at that he suddenly stepped back a pace and raised both hands, each clasping a revolver.

"It makes no difference who I am, I will protect myself. The girl remains in my hands as a hostage; while you, Captain Waite, or whatever your name may be, can meet me at some other place if you want to

talk business. When I am at home no man ever scares me, or gets the drop."

While he spoke two men entered. One picked up the disguised girl and carried her away, while the other linked his arm in that of the remaining intruder, in a free and easy way.

"All right, my covey. You and I can take a stroll down the avenue. The judge is off for a tea party and we are only in the way here."

CHAPTER XX.

THE GANG GETS IN MORE WORK.

PRESTON BLAINE turned away from the neighborhood of Judge Wetherington's in anything but a pleasant mood. He had just had enough experience during the last few days to make him suspicious, and not enough to enable him to see clearly. He was inclined to believe that he had been badly deceived, but could not imagine in what way. Remembering the occurrences of the preceding night he began to doubt if General Rawle had left his rooms at all. It was less than natural that he should.

When this idea fairly got in his head, he determined to verify it, and he turned his face toward the hotel.

As he came near he glanced upward.

He had a very clear idea of where the general's rooms were located, and as he neared the spot, unconsciously he looked up.

Just at that moment there was a flash of light in the window of the room where he believed Regina lay.

It caught his eye, and he halted and watched. The light appeared and disappeared several times. It seemed very much like a signal.

A slight exclamation caused him to look sharply around.

There was another watcher.

At least it could hardly be an unmeaning coincidence, that a shabby-looking old man should be watching that same spot at that identical time, and should hurry away when the light finally disappeared.

Scarcely taking time to think why he did it, the major followed.

When he had gone some little distance, he discovered that either the old man was acting in a very strange way, or else he was aware of being tracked.

After noticing that much, the major was all cautious attention. He had been beaten so often of late that he was not only being put on his mettle, but he was learning wisdom. Though he looked keenly around, he could see no one that appeared to be a trailer, so that he was almost assured that his own pursuit had been noticed.

In that case the man had something to fear, and something to conceal.

In that case it was not very likely he was what he seemed.

"The fellow is well gotten up, but I'll wager money he is in disguise. If he is, there is enough unexhausted muscle there to make him dangerous. He may hide in the shadows, and try to lay me out when I stumble within reach."

This was a very shrewd suspicion, and almost at once it seemed justified. Some distance separated the two, and suddenly the quarry disappeared.

The spot was almost deserted of passers-by, and Blaine, his head crammed full of love in regard to the Gilt Edge Gang, hesitated about proceeding. There might be a trap or a pitfall just ahead.

While he loitered, pressing close up to the inner edge of the cave, the affair developed rapidly. There was the sound of a low cry, and a scurrying of feet.

At once the major dashed forward. Three women had flitted by him at the last corner, and from their garb he had judged that they were Sisters of Mercy, hurrying away on some mission. Now he was horrified at hearing a heavy blow, and seeing one of them drop as if shot.

Then he could see the shabby old man at work, hitting out with the strength and skill of a scienced boxer. Two more blows the man struck; and at each blow one of the Sisters went down.

Blaine was a heavy hitter; but he was no brawler; and he suspected that in this case he was clearly overmatched so far as muscle went. Instead of throwing himself upon the ruffian, as was his first impulse, his hand

went up; and he had a cocked revolver aimed at point-blank range.

"Surrender there, you villain. I'll have you in the station-house for this work, if I have to carry in your corpse myself."

"Don't be a fool, Preston Blaine," briskly answered the man, in a smoother tone than had been expected.

"This isn't your quarrel at all, and you're only breeding trouble for yourself by trying to make it such."

"It is my quarrel whenever I see a brute insult a woman. You have struck three, and women, too, who should have been sacred. No parley now. I hope we will find a policeman on the next corner. If we do I shall leave you in his hands and come back to see how much damage you have done."

"Ha, ha! And are you that easily made the dupe of appearances? Examine your three blooming females and then say if they deserve such kind treatment at your hands. My word for it—there's not a woman in the lot. You can do what you please, but of course I shall see that they do me no harm; unless you listen to reason, and slope with me while we have the chance."

The words of the old man—or the disguised young man—seemed like a marvelously bold lie, and Blaine's hand never wavered as he heard them. What he would have done or said had time been allowed him, remains a secret to this day; for, as his lips opened, a heavy blow fell upon him from behind, and he dropped unconscious upon the pavement.

When he came back to consciousness everything was quiet, and the man and the three women had vanished.

Slowly he steadied himself into a sitting posture and stared around him, at first wondering what had happened, and then that the fracas had attracted no attention.

Then he heard approaching footsteps, but he was yet too limp to attempt to stand. Feeling around in an aimless sort of way, his hand touched the revolver with which he had been menacing the man he had followed. He caught up the weapon and held on to it, awaiting the new-comer with the trepidation of one who has just been thoroughly slugged, and is uncertain what new misfortune may be about to befall him.

He was not long in doubt.

The man came nearer, and caught sight of the figure on the sidewalk.

"Hello! what's this? Drunk as usual, old man? Better crawl out."

The hearty tones were familiar, and the major felt himself grow stronger on the instant.

"Is that you, Captain Hardy?" he said, staggering to his feet, and holding out his hands as though reaching for help.

"Captain Hardy it is, sure enough; but who in creation are you? What has been going on here?"

"Murder for all I know—something very like it I am sure. Look around. You may find a body or two. After they struck me I don't know what happened."

"Hello again. It's our friend the major. Didn't I tell you so? The gang has been after you in earnest this time, and lucky you are that they didn't leave you with your skull split wide open. Let's look for damages first thing. This may be more serious than you think."

"Oh! I'm all right. Some one struck me on the back of the head with a club, but I think the blow glanced, just taking the bark off. Ough! I can feel the blood trickling down my neck now."

"You're all right," answered the captain, who had been feeling while he spoke, and digging his thumbs into the major's head in a scientific way.

"Nothing broken here, and nothing that will show when you get dressed up. Now fire away with your story, quick. We're losing valuable time. How did you come to be here, and what has happened. Did you recognize any one?"

The question caused Blaine to put on his thinking-cap—not the easiest operation in the world, either; for he was still somewhat confused. Up to this moment he had not thought of recognizing any one. He had supposed that of course they were all strangers.

Not to lose time he began; and, as he was thinking as he went along, perhaps he did

not tell it as clearly as he might have done.

Still, Hardy understood the drift of it.

"So you followed a party that looked like an old man, but whom you had reason to suppose was disguised, and you found him indulging in a fracas with what seemed to be three women. Singular sort of a story, this. He acted as though he wanted to make you believe that he was your friend and he told you there was not a woman in the lot. Very well. Can't you guess who the man might be; or have you any idea who the three are? Speak quick. If you've nothing to suggest, I want to follow it up the best I can."

"There was something familiar about his voice," answered Blaine, in a bewildered sort of way. "Of course there can't be anything in that, because I left him at the hotel; but do you know if I hadn't known better I might have believed, from the voice only, that it was General Rawle in masquerade."

"Three women, eh?" put in Hardy, reflectively.

"You didn't see their faces I suppose. Do you know I have an idea. What was that the other night about General Rawle's double? Don't it strike you that we've got a trace of him again? And how about the three men that were engaged in carrying him off? Perhaps they were in disguise then, and have broken out in a new place to-night. I can't make much out of it yet, but, by heavens, I'm going to know what it all means before I get through. Come along. There's a wide-awake man on this beat, and he may have an idea or two. You and I can talk as we go along."

"Then you think this may be a clew?"

"Clew! Heavens, yes. We have dozens of clews—this is another—but the misfortune is that none of them lead to anything. The rascals seem to be omnipresent and perfectly reckless. They must have wings and fly away whenever they have finished a job. You are certain that the old man could not have been the general himself?"

"Positively. But I am sure that we are on the trail of a crime that somehow blends in with the murder at the hotel."

"Most likely. I wish I could find out how and why that injured man left the hotel so secretly. It looks suspicious, to say the least."

"It is certain that *he* had nothing to do with poor Regina's death," the major suggested.

"Nothing is certain. In spite of all that we have heard, we are still groping in the dark. We may stay there to the end, or we may come suddenly into full sunlight. Let us hope, and do our best."

They talked as they hurried along; and just then Captain Hardy found his energetic officer.

He had evidently tried to stop some one. His club was in his hand, and Hardy's practiced eyes saw that there had been a struggle. Beyond this there was little to be learned, for the man lay with the top of his head crushed in.

Preston Blaine grew sick as he realized what his own fate might have been, while the captain uttered an execration of horror and rage.

"The murdering villains. It is all the work of the same hands. I'll swing them yet, or I'll die myself in the effort."

CHAPTER XXI.

PROTEUS GETS LEFT.

CLIFFORD MELTON in a few words had described his position very well. He was a young man who managed to get rid of his own superfluous cash very easily, and as much more as he could wring out of his father. He was not an idiot either. In a great many respects he was shrewd enough; but he had drifted into the falsest of false ways, and, as Madam Velvet had so plainly told him, was on the very verge of ruin.

He knew all that when he gave the matter a serious thought; but there was a fascination about the worthless, wicked life that bound him to it.

Besides, there was the madam herself.

It was hard for him to define his feeling toward her. He knew that she was much his elder; he believed that she was a wicked woman; he did not think that she cared for him; yet if she gave him the chance he turned to her from his other companions, from

his cards and his wine. She could have twisted him around her finger, and he knew it.

He had made her a distinct promise; and he meant to keep it.

Without the least effort to discover her reasons for what she had said and done he went straight to his rooms.

It was the earliest he had entered them for an age; and his slumbers that night were both long and deep. Concerning the money he had won he thought but little, and when he arose in the morning he remembered very well that he had made a promise of some sort in connection with it, the particulars of which were not altogether distinct.

As he had gone to bed sober he awoke with an appetite, and rather astonished himself with the breakfast that he put away.

After that he hesitated as to what he should do.

It was so much before his usual time that he was all abroad.

And then it seemed to him that if he wished to keep his promise of the night before it wouldn't do to go off to any of his ordinary stamping-grounds.

There was temptation there; and he knew his own weakness as well as did the sharpers that played on it.

"It seems to me," he said to himself, pulling thoughtfully at his mustache, "that the madam didn't make that request for nothing. She could hardly have helped me to the winning, but who knows what her intentions are? I'm a double-dyed fool to be thinking about her, but by Jove she's the most fascinating woman I ever knew. I'll finish up on the square with her if it takes me to purgatory. If she *should* take the notion to fill the role of good angel and missionary she sha'n't be disappointed about my meeting her half-way."

He half regretted his good resolution in less than an hour after it was made.

There was a rap at his door and when he opened it there was Van Tyler, one of his worthless young acquaintances.

"Here's to you, old man," said the visitor half forcing his way in.

"Everybody has heard of your good luck last night, and they're laying in wait by the score down-town. If they knew where you hung up of mornings they'd have been down on you here; but you've kept that dark, and I didn't give them a pointer. I tell you, you ought to take that into consideration when I get down to business, for I believe I could have made a couple hundred peddling out the information; and that's about the size of the friendly loan I thought of striking you for. Eh! You willing to help a fellow out of a beastly bad hole?"

The question was asked lightly enough, but Melton recognized the real anxiety that lay behind it.

Tyler was a bad enough sort, yet Clifford had a friendly feeling for him for his jovial ways, and did not care to keep him in suspense. He answered seriously enough:

"See here, Tyler, I haven't made an independent fortune, and my little pile wouldn't go very far if I tried to make a divvy of that size with all my speaking friends. I've no doubt you bolted up here with the idea that it would be first come, first served. You're not very far wrong. In the first place, I've got a side-partner that I have to take an account of stock with. Until that's done, I can't pay out a cent of my earnings last night. But if you are in a hole, and two hundred will help you out, I think I had pretty nearly that much of my own when I began work, and you shall have it. What are you going to do?"

Tyler looked suspiciously about him, and then lowered his voice, so that it would be impossible for an invisible eavesdropper to hear him, as he answered:

"I'm going to bolt. If I meant to stay here I'd have more sense than to compromise on two hundred, when I had the chance of roping you into short cards, and striking you for all you're worth. But I don't intend to stand on ceremony in going; I mean to go at once."

"What's up? No serious trouble, I hope. I'd hate to see you mixed up in anything that would get the bloodhounds of the law on your track."

Van Tyler gave a snort of disgust.

"Bloodhounds of the law be hanged! If

that was all I'd stay and fight it out. They're the kind that are blind and have a cold in their heads. No, sir. There's another sort of bloodhound on my track that's a great deal worse. He means business, and when he hits he hits to keep. He's got it in for me, and the sooner I get out of his reach the better. Unfortunately I've no money, and he knows it; so he's playing me like a cat does a mouse. I tell you I'm no coward, but if I don't jump the ranch I'll be a dead man before a week."

Clifford looked at his *vis-a-vis* in surprise. He could not believe that he was telling the truth.

"It strikes me, if I knew the man and his intentions, I wouldn't wait for him to begin. I'd strike first. Where are the police?"

"Oh! what's that you're giving me? I'm a likely looking duck to hollow for the cops. He would rather that I would. In that case he'd have me sure. No, sir; I'm going to bolt, and if you'll let me have a starter I'll give you a point or two that'll make you a heap wiser. Come now, like a good fellow—yes or no?"

"But who is the man? It may be that he's not half as desperate as he looks."

"Now you have me. Call him Conyngham if you like. That's not his real name, and that is where he has the inside track. If I knew what his name was on change the bulge would be just the other way. But you can't fight a shadow, and there's somewhere a man with a shot-gun that makes the shadow, and, as I said before, he's got it in for me. Now, what are you going to do about it? Of course I can raise some money; but not enough. I'm going to put a good many yards between us when I do start, and I don't want to be starved out the first month."

Tyler was in earnest and so was Clifford Melton.

"See here, Van, I'm not sure but what it's all a beat, that you will laugh at me for to my face after you've taken in all that you can grab. I don't know anything about Conyngham or any of your other associates, but I'm willing to help you to get rid of the whole batch of them. Here's a hundred and seventy-five. I can't touch the partnership money until it is divided, but you can take all I have of my own. You see, I rather fancy you, anyhow, and I want to get rid of the whole business as quick as possible. To everybody else I can say, no, with a stern face."

"A thousand thanks, and let me tell you, though it is not likely that you will—"

He ceased speaking, and looked up with a quick, rat-like glance at the door. Some one was outside and tapping with no very gentle knuckles. Then he turned to Melton, speaking even lower than before.

"Of course, everything I said is in confidence. A man must talk sometimes or burst. I don't want this fellow outside to see me. Can't you hide me somewhere? Somehow he sounds deuced familiar."

"There's the closet. That's the regular thing in such cases. You can take to it until he is gone."

"A thousand more thanks. I've got my reasons. Help me out and I won't forget you."

He stuffed the money in his pocket and vanished, while Melton unlocked the door, saying as he did so:

"Come in, old man. I may as well take them as they come—and you're the first on the list."

Nevertheless he gave a gesture of disgust as his eyes fell upon the man who entered.

"Hello, Uncle Johnny, what are you after? you're a month ahead of your time. Come around the last of the month and I'll be ready for you. If you won't renew I'll pay you. I've got the money coming in then, as I told you when I made the loan, and though I need it badly enough for other things, I won't go back on what I said."

"Uncle Johnny" was just as much a relative as a pawnbroker or a note-shaver usually is. He was a gray haired, old-looking man, with bent shoulders, feeble step and a wrinkled face.

He entered quietly and without the least hesitation, in spite of the ungracious nature of his reception. If Melton could have seen his eyes, he would have noted that they took a keen, comprehensive survey of the room, which fortunately, perhaps, gave no sign of another visitor.

Tyler had been leaning over the table during his confidential conversation, so that the chairs told no tales. In fact everything looked as though Clifford Melton had but lately arisen. His imprint was still on the bed from which he had risen when Van Tyler came.

"No one about, is there?" said Uncle John, suspiciously.

"You're about," answered Melton, coldly.

"No one else that I can see."

"That is right. I thought I would catch you here alone, and I want to have a little talk with you that maybe you wouldn't want any one else to hear. I wouldn't."

He spoke pointedly and probably for a purpose. If Melton had not had his nerves under better control than usual, he would doubtless have given an uneasy look toward the closet, after hearing such an exordium. As it was he simply answered:

"Well."

"It is not well at all. You are mistaken about your note. It came due yesterday. You wanted ninety days, but you didn't get it. I said maybe I'd give you thirty days more when the time came; but that ain't what you put your name to and you ought to remember it. You haven't pulled up as you said you were going to, and from what I hear you won't last another month. How do you suppose I can afford to risk my money? Eh? I must have it to-day and I mean to have it."

"I think you're an infernal old fraud," responded Melton, hotly. "If you've come here to beat me, you'll find this is the wrong shop. I don't intend to be bullied or beaten, and you can take yourself off with that knowledge just as soon as you've a mind to."

"You're a fool," came the blunt answer. "The note speaks for itself, and it tells all that, and something more. If you are wise you would only be too glad to get it back now, and at twice what it seems to call for. Young man, do you think you can fool me, who have been in the business since before you were born? Pay your note now, or take the consequences."

"The consequences? What do you mean, old man?" was the hot retort.

"Do you dare to say there is anything wrong about that bit of paper?"

"Here it is," responded the other, shaking a slip of paper that he held between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. "It speaks for itself. It says three thousand dollars due to-day."

"It says a lie, then," broke in Melton.

"It says several things that are lies, then," retorted the money-lender, sternly.

"It says on the back that Charles King wrote the name there. The moment I looked at it carefully I could see that he never did. That's what brought me here this morning, to tell you that whatever else you do you daren't let this note go to protest. And unless paid, to protest it will go."

Melton was too thoroughly astounded at the charge to make any immediate answer, and the other went on in a steady, venomous sort of way:

"You see I'm one of those that always want to give a young man a chance, especially when he is a party that I can make use of. Of course you don't intend to pay, can't pay if you want to; but there's nothing like leaving an opening to correct any such little error as you seem to have fallen into. It makes you more grateful; spurs you up to harder work. I have you foul any way; but of course, if we come to terms I shall hold the matter over. It's a great pity you can't pay."

"And I say that this all is a concocted scheme. Show me the note with my signature to it if you dare."

"I wouldn't advise you to question your signature too closely, but such as it is there it is."

"And there's your money!" exclaimed Melton.

His movements were so rapid and well timed that before the seeming old man could frustrate his intentions they were accomplished. With one bound Clifford twitched away the note; with the other he slapped upon the hand of "Uncle Johnny" a package that he had hastily drawn from his pocket.

"Three thousand dollars you will find there, for I counted it not half an hour ago. Now, on your own showing, you and I are quits."

The old man was not so old after all; or rage renewed the activity of his limbs. He thrust the package of notes into his pocket, with a keen eye for the profits; then he sprung straight at Melton's throat, and fastened on it with the terrible grip of one who meant to stay.

Clifford had a good opinion of himself, but he found he was a child in those hands, that twisted him back over the table, and held him, unable to move or make an outcry.

"You want your lesson right now, and I'm going to give it to you," ground out the man between his set teeth, and he looked down at the blackening face below him.

"If I don't choke your life out it will be because I can make a better investment by keeping life, note and money."

"You think, Captain Conyningham," interposed a laughing voice behind him, and then, before he could turn, there came the thud of a solid blow, that fell full on his unprotected head and beat him to the floor.

Melton staggered gasping to his feet and stared about him.

"Say, Cliff, I'm a worthless cuss, you know; but it strikes me it was all-fired lucky that I happened in here, and luckier still I happened to have a life-preserver with me. It wouldn't have been worth while flipping at him bare-handed. He'd have got away with all both of us."

"But—but what are we to do next? You heard what the scoundrel said. We can't kill him, but I swear I feel like it."

"Kill him—no. Go through him for your stamps and then kick him out. Didn't you hear what I said. Oh, it does me good all over. It's elegant. I've got the bulge on him; and if I don't keep it call me a double-barreled liar. Only you keep a close mouth about who was in here to help you through—and if I were you, I'd take a little trip to the country till everything quiets down. It will be awful unhealthy for you to try the sidewalks in New York after dark."

"But don't you see the whole thing is a lie and a conspiracy? I'm not going to run away. If he wants to push the matter I'll meet him in the courts and send him where he threatens to send me."

"Courts be hanged! He's not that kind. He'll mount you with a club, and stave your head in. Get your three thousand and bundle him out before he comes to. I don't want him to see me, and I do want to know where he goes to."

"No, I did owe him three thousand and, if he has anticipated the day let him keep it. You are witness to the payment. As for the rest, I owe you one and I'll take your advice. Out he goes—if you're sure he isn't dead."

"Not dead, but sleeping. All right. I'm your friend clean through. I'll watch him, and you keep quiet."

And then, without hesitation, the two dragged the insensible man out of the room and tumbled him down the steps, utterly careless of who might see the operation.

Then Melton coolly went back to his room and shut the door, while Van Tyler vanished with a celerity that rather betokened practice, and certainly evinced caution.

The blow he had struck with his life-preserver was a hard one, but he was not wrong in regard to the duration of its effects. The subject refused to wait for a coroner's jury. He gasped, stretched his limbs, and arose to his feet, shaky but wide awake.

Evidently he had had his lesson for the day, and wanted no more of it. Melton could hardly believe his senses when, from his window, he saw the man staggering off without paying any attention to the questions that various people seemed to try to ask him.

Nothing was to be seen of Van Tyler; but that he was on the track, Melton could guess. Whether he could keep it remained to be proved. If he did it would be a cold day for Proteus, since the spy had already fathomed one end of the mystery.

Yet Proteus was shrewd as well as desperate; and Van Tyler might well look to his own safety. There was something more to come of all this.

CHAPTER XXII.

VAN TYLER FIRES A TRAIN.

WHILE the captain stood over his murdered policeman, and Preston Blaine stood beside Hardy, his eyes expressing all the horror that he felt, the two were startled at hearing a low moan from a point not very far distant.

"Another victim," said Blaine, pointing in the direction whence came the sound.

To him New York was, in spite of all his past experience, putting on a new face. At midnight it seemed a lonely forest, through which here and there a victim stole, followed by ravening wolves.

"I hear," answered Hardy, nodding shortly.

"Let us look for him. It may be one of the villains, though I am afraid there is no such good luck. More likely it is your old man detective. I'll see what is up before I rap for assistance. I want a minute or so clean start on the rest."

He was stepping off in search when the moan was repeated; and it evidently came from a neighboring area. It was only a few steps, and then Hardy came upon a body, which he carried up, and toward the street-lamp beyond.

"Who is it?" asked Blaine, deeply interested.

"I can't tell you yet, except that it seems to be an outsider. He has it bad, though. I'm afraid he's done for. He's a victim, too. See. His pockets are inside out."

"Wait. His face, or what I can make of it, seems familiar. It's a young sport about town, and I believe his name is Tyler. Like as not he's made a strike, and the villains have marked him down."

"Hush. He is saying something, listen!"

The voice of the injured man was low, but his words were distinct.

"I told you I had him. Oh, he is a sly one; but Van Tyler is around every time. You can bring on your sluggers but you can't drive him off the trail. Who's King? He's a fraud. And who's General Rawle? He's another fraud. I tell you, Captain Conyningham, I'm right in town, all dressed up. And as for Judge Wetherington—he's all both the same person. Why, what an infernal scoundrel you fellows is I know you now, from the ground up; and you're all the same fellow. You hear me, say? The Gilt Edge Gang is busted wide open at last, and Van Tyler is the man that did it. If you don't believe it, ask Clifford Melton. He helped me out of the hole, and I'm going to make it pleasant for him when I get the chance. Good-night, I'm going to sleep now. When I wake up I'll tell you all about the Gang. Not dead, but crazy as a bed-bug, eh? Who in blazes are you?"

The maundering ceased and the eyes of the young man closed with a wonderful suddenness. It was hard to tell whether he had lost his senses entirely, or returned to complete consciousness.

Whichever it was, he had no more to say, and lay with closed eyes, perfectly motionless.

His words had fallen on listening ears.

Blaine, to be sure, took them for the senseless raving of a badly-injured man, and was only attracted because he heard the name of General Rawle mentioned; but Captain Hardy thought he perceived a method in the man's madness, and would have been willing to listen to more.

"Poor fellow, I am afraid he has come to the end," said the major, in a pitying way. "Strange that I never met him. He must know Rawle. Did you hear him mention his name? To be sure, after its being in all the papers he might easily enough have had it in his mind. Of course his raving had nothing in it."

"I'm not so sure. If there is anything in it, then he knows entirely too much for an innocent young man. He must be taken care of to-night, and perhaps by morning we may be able to get more out of him, though I have a suspicion that as soon as he can talk he won't. I shan't forget the names, and I'll look a little after the lot. It's certainly very odd."

Captain Hardy was not forgetting his patient, but he was talking on more for his own benefit than for Blaine's. It seems very strange that both of these men could be laid

out without attracting the attention of any one else, and he suspected that Tyler had been attacked and settled first, and the policeman afterward, as he ran up to interfere. A few minutes had been apparently wasted; but the captain did not think so.

"Good," he said, "here come my men at last. We'll have a chance to go to work. A minute or two will explain everything sufficiently to leave things in their hands. Then I will have work to do; and you can help me, too, if you are willing to act blindly. Oh, I begin to see the threads now; and if I can follow them there will be trouble when I reach the end they lead to."

"Count on me. What can I do to aid you?"

"First, for General Rawle. I want you to go to his rooms at once. Make any pretext you choose, but go. If you find him there then advise him that you have heard there were three assassins on his trail, and that he should beware of them and the Gilt Edge Gang. If he is not there but should come in afterward not a word to him of what you have heard to-night. Either he is a deeper plotter than we have guessed, or he is being plotted against by men who mean, one way or another, to bring him to grief. Go now. I will meet you or send you word to the hotel in an hour."

Blaine would have demurred had he not seen by the positive way Hardy spoke that he was very much in haste and very much in earnest. He would have liked well enough to see young Tyler to some place where he could receive attention and perhaps have a chance to tell what he knew; and he would have liked to follow on in the pursuit of the assassins, who, it seemed, were to be allowed to walk away at their leisure.

Nevertheless, after just a momentary hesitation, he turned away. He was still loyal to his old commander, and it struck him that without being compelled to reveal any of the secrets of the police captain who had made him in a sort of way, his confidant, he might be able to give the general such a hint as to enable him to guard himself from any possible misconception, and perhaps save him from the annoyance that would come doubly hard at such a time.

As he went along he could not well keep from thinking that they were a bunglesome set of people on the police force. The coolness with which Hardy had acted began to look very much like stolidity.

"It's the same old story over again," he muttered to himself.

"I don't wonder that they have done nothing. Here was one dead man and another dying; and we stood there coldly discussing the probable chance of its being a clew, while the murderers, that we knew had not had time to get a block away, were hunting their holes. One thing is sure. Either the old man or the three disguised females—if they were females—can tell a great deal about this night's work. I will follow Hardy's lead to-night; but, if nothing comes of it, to-morrow I will see what I can do fighting the Thugs my own way. Meantime I don't like the work he has given me any too well, though I see there is a chance that it is a work of wisdom.

"But whether I relish it or not I shall do it well. Perhaps some day, even if he knows the whole truth, Rawle will forgive me."

The major was a good deal more excited than he expected, but the rapid walk steadied his nerves.

By this time he was well-known as a friend of the general, who came and went at all hours, and he felt no hesitation about asking for him.

"He's not come in yet," said Mr. Patterson, who happened to be in the office. "I suppose he wanted a bit of fresh air. He won't be gone long, though; and if you wish to wait you might go up to his parlor until he comes. I can let you in. I suppose the rooms will seem dreadful lonesome, but then I don't think you're troubled much with nerves."

It was a mere chance that caused the major to seize the opportunity thus proffered.

He went his way without darkening counsel by words without wisdom. Utterly unconscious of using special care he silently inserted the key in the lock, noiselessly entered the room, and quietly dropped into a convenient chair. He was not thinking just

then about Rawle—his mind was busy with remembrances of Regina.

If he had chosen his position with a purpose he could not have done better. In the gloom of the room one not aware of his presence would have to be looking sharply to see him. When he heard a light step in the adjoining apartment he turned his face in that direction, and was tempted to make his presence known. It was a wonder that he did not, but something restrained him. Instead, he waited and watched.

The door was only slightly ajar; it opened completely, and he saw that Katie stood on the threshold, in an attitude of listening, with her eyes fixed upon the outer door. When she turned away Blaine's suspicions were excited, though he would scarcely have been willing to admit as much. After a momentary struggle he arose softly and stole toward the door.

Katie stood looking about her in a puzzled way. In her hand she held a small bunch of keys, and her glance went from one piece of furniture to another, returning after each excursion to a battered looking trunk, the top of which seemed to have been but carelessly let down, since, from under one corner, a boot-strap protruded a little way.

Finally, she spoke softly to herself:

"By all the rights of the game it should be there, yet I have examined it a dozen times and found nothing. I will try it once more. Time is precious, and this may be my last chance."

After that the major needed nothing more to keep him on the watch. Here was an underhanded game of some kind, and he intended to see what it meant.

The young woman raised the lid and looked at the miscellaneous collection disclosed.

"Principally boots!" she muttered with an air of contempt, yet looking keenly at every part of the trunk, comparing the outside with the inside in a way that showed that if there was any hidden drawer or tray she did not intend it to escape her.

Nothing of the kind was even suggested and she had already turned away, when another idea appeared to strike her. She sunk down once more by the trunk and began carefully to inspect its contents.

If she looked like a thief Preston Blaine felt like a spy, and was strongly tempted to end the matter right then. Luckily he did not. He waited; and so grew more and more interested in the proceedings.

"She is evidently after something that she believes is hidden," he thought to himself, "and very cleverly she is going about the work of finding it. Who but a woman would think of examining the insoles of a batch of old shoes. Ah!"

He almost spoke aloud; and if he had done so it is quite likely she would not have heard him, so engrossed was she.

"At last!" she exclaimed, rising to her feet and holding in her hand a closely folded paper. "Now, General Rawle, we will see who wins."

Then she gave a little cry of dismay. Major Blaine's hand dropped on her shoulder, with no gentle gripe.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BEYOND BELIEF.

THE major had stolen up quietly, and when he placed his hand upon the detected pilferer he believed his work was done. He took little pride in his task, but he could not do less than his duty; and he was totally unprepared for what followed.

The low cry threw him off his guard. For a moment he fancied that he had obtained an easy victory.

Yet before his mouth was fairly open to speak the woman had wheeled; and by this time the paper had vanished. In its place her hand clasped a revolver, that looked Preston Blaine straight in the face.

"Be quiet, sir!" the woman said, with an angry stamp of her foot.

"I would not harm you for a fortune, but if you crazily interfere I must hold my own, even if you have to die. I scarcely need tell you that I have right on my side as well as might."

Blaine was taken by surprise; but he did not altogether lose his self-possession, and in a moment he was as cool as the coolest.

"I dislike very much to be harsh with a woman, but the circumstances admit of no

choice. I find you rummaging through the property of my friend, and about to make off with some paper or other that is probably of great value. Certainly I can do nothing else than stop you. If you have any explanation I am willing to hear it, but I would advise you to accept the situation peaceably, for you must be aware that any attempt to use such a weapon as that would only result in calling aid to me at once. Give me your weapon and consider yourself my prisoner until you can explain to my satisfaction what I have seen."

He was stretching out his hand in a matter-of-fact way, as though he really expected a surrender to follow his sober advice. With some women he might have won, while with any his utter fearlessness must have had its effect. The result with Miss Katie was that she gave a quick step backward, so as to be beyond his reach, and then gave a short, hard laugh.

"Thank you, Major Preston Blaine, for the opinion you have of me, but really I am not of that kind. You can neither trick me nor scare me; and if you attempt to drive me you will find that I can hold my own against force. Things are not always what they seem, and I am surprised that you have not recognized the fact before this. Really, young man, you are not as shrewd as you think."

Preston Blaine did not look very shrewd just then. He was too astounded for anything—if he had dropped senseless to the floor it would have been no wonder.

Any way his lips closed, his eyes opened to their widest extent, while his whole frame quivered with nervous excitement.

"Ah! you see, do you? And you haven't a word to say. It's not every man that has the opportunity to speak face to face with a young and charming ghost, and it seems to me if I were in your place I would improve the occasion."

The mockery in her voice brought him to his senses.

"Who are you?" he asked, harshly.

"Somewhere or somehow there has been a ghastly jest; what is the meaning of it? Either you are another woman trying to masquerade as Regina Rawle, or you are Regina Rawle in disguise."

"You have hit the truth at last, have you? Well, perhaps you will admit now that I have some right here after all. Rest assured I am only looking after my own, and armed as I am now I have nothing further to conceal. When the truth comes out, you and the rest of the world will be more than surprised."

"I am more than surprised now. What is the meaning of this terrible masquerade? What inducement could there be for you to sham death and have your name in the headlines of every paper? How have you been able to deceive your father; the authorities; your friends?"

"Thank you, I did not deceive them; they deceived themselves. A woman was found dead in my bed, and they jumped to the conclusion that it must be I. You never looked at the corpse; and if you had, I don't suppose that you would have known the difference."

"But, meantime, where have you been? And your father—he has been almost heart-broken over the terrible tragedy."

"Hush! you can see no further into a millstone than the rest of the world. The man you call General Rawle is worse than you. He would scarcely be apt to know the difference, since he shut his eyes when he looked at the dear departed, and he is neither General Rawle nor my father. There's some excuse for the others being taken in by the miserable fraud; but for you, an old-time friend and companion of the genuine general, it looks to me as though there was none at all."

"Not General Rawle!"

The major was sufficiently interested now, though this last statement was so flatly against the evidence of his own senses that he was slow to accept it.

"Pardon me. As you say, I ought to know—do know—my old commander when I see him. Unvail your mystery fairly. Unless I can understand it better I certainly will not believe. Who was it that was killed in your place?"

"Give me your promise first; I must know

that if I tell to you the whole truth, and convince you, then you will be my friend whosoever's interest that friendship may hurt."

"I am all amazed, yet if only what you have told me is the truth I can give you the promise without hesitation."

"Then listen:

"Perhaps you have understood that I have not seen my parent for very many years. You know that after the war he left his native country and wandered through the Orient. Finally I only heard of him at long intervals and he became almost a myth.

"When I learned at last, that he was about to return to his native country I was very happy over the intelligence, and joined him at the earliest moment.

"He did not seem at all wanting in natural affection, and we appeared, on the face of things, to be a very happily situated couple. I think I would have been perfectly content had it not been for the astounding discovery that he was not my father at all."

"But my dear girl, that does not prove that he is not General Rawle. I am very much inclined to credit anything you tell me; but I have the evidence of my senses that he is my old commander; while, if there is any mistake, it may very well be on his part, in believing that you are his daughter. I am not altogether a child to believe the last and largest story told me."

"And yet you have three or four times been the dupe of a flimsy disguise. Listen and I will give to you the proof positive of what I have said. General Rawle had not only a daughter, but a son. The son it is true, has been thought to be dead for years and years; but that does not excuse his own father for being ignorant of the fact that he once existed. When I discovered that I had my suspicions. What we have since learned has made us positive. And I can assure you that there has been a deep game played, of which I now hold the key. Whether or not my father has been murdered by the villain who has been personating him I have yet to learn. How hard a task that will be you can judge when you think of the extraordinary powers of the man who for a time deceived us all. Will you believe me now, or must I imperil everything by revealing the further proofs that had best be kept in reserve for the present?"

Preston Blaine had been shocked and he had been surprised. If he had not already lost his head he was in a fair way for it now, as the softest, whitest little hand dropped on his shoulder, and the eyes, that now he wondered that he had ever failed to recognize, looked into his in a way that set his heart going faster, and his very finger-tips tingling. This woman had actually come back to him from the other world; he knew that she wanted to wind him around her finger; and it had come down to a question with him whether he should let her. As to the story—if any one else had told it he would have laughed it to scorn. From her lips it might be worth while to at least try to fancy it true. The major was honest as man or friend. He could not give away the interests of General Rawle; and yet—was it not possible to compromise in some way, protecting Regina, and preserving her good opinion until he could convince her of her error?

He spoke slowly and gravely.

"I think you are honest in your intentions, but wrong in your facts. When you came to your sober senses you would despise me if I allowed myself to forget the sacred duty I owe to the man I call my friend, and who has so freely trusted us both. I think it can only be in his absence that this wild delusion seizes you. No doubt he will be here soon, and—but, heavens, what will not the shock be when he learns of the terrible mistake that has been made, and finds you still in the land of the living."

"Not as great a shock as you imagine; though, such as it is, I do not wish to give it to him for a little while if it can be avoided. There is a mystery about it that we have not fathomed. Before he knows that I live, we must know whether it was for him that the attempt was made to put me out of the road."

"Regina, you are surely mad, though I hope it is only a temporary craze. What wonder, too, after the narrow escape from

such deadly danger? Whether intentionally or not, your companion sacrificed her life for you. Leave me to break the news to your father. Then you can see him, and a word from him will dissipate these illusions. Be quick now to make up your mind, since he may be here any moment, and before you go, return to its place of keeping, or intrust to me that paper. I will see that justice is done you, and that all shall be explained. If you are *not* General Rawle's daughter, I promise you that you will find in me such a true friend as you never before knew; and I can say as much for my old commander after the edge of his disappointment has once been dulled. Is it a bargain?"

He was wasting time fearfully. She listened, stretched out her hand, and then drew it back again with a laugh, as he moved to meet it.

"Enough of this nonsense. I will not order you to hold your peace—that is a matter of taste which I leave to you to decide—but I do tell you to stand aside. I have business that cannot wait longer, and it calls me elsewhere."

He still held out his hand.

"Very well. Go. But you must not take with you what belongs to General Rawle. Leave with me that paper, and for the rest you may do as you please."

"Ha, ha! You are growing angry. I thought you had more sense, or I more influence. Interfere with me at your peril. The paper I will keep. When the true general Rawle asks me for it it will go into his hands—before that into none other."

"Then the time is here, my dear, and the true General Rawle with it. You have found there was something in a boot besides leather. Good. If you were sharp enough to discover that no fraud can befool you, I am glad to find I have a daughter after my own heart. Give me the paper."

At the first sound of the voice the two had turned toward the intruder.

It was not the General Rawle that Preston Blaine had known of late, but it was the man he had followed not so very long ago, and who had vanished about the time he had been stricken insensible from behind.

"And who are you?" exclaimed Blaine fiercely, darting in between the two with a quick side step or two, and making a vain effort to watch both at the same time.

The intruder gave a short, grim laugh.

"I should think you would begin to suspect. You were ready enough the other night when I wanted no recognition and you picked me up off of the street. Why, confound you, you have been the biggest card in that rascal's hand, and he seems to have played you for all you were worth. Thank Heaven I've got my foes in front of me at last."

"And who then do you say is the man I have known as General Rawle?"

"Who but the scoundrel Edgar Raven, the chief of the Gilt Edge Gang?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

SOMEBODY EVIDENTLY WRONG.

THE exclamation of General Rawle Number Two is doubtless no surprise to the reader; but to Preston Blaine, in spite of all that he had heard and seen, it was a shock, though as yet he by no means was satisfied to believe in the self-asserted identity of the newcomer.

And while Blaine silently digested the intelligence he had just heard, he had an opportunity to note that the two were eying each other sharply, as though wishing to believe yet not altogether convinced.

"I have already been badly deceived, and now I do not intend to take on trust any and every man that comes saying 'I am your father.' Prove to me that you are General Rawle and I have much to tell you."

So Regina interjected and the other answered promptly:

"And I might say the same—though there is little difficulty about the task for either of us. There is paper convenient; write a page of the last letter I received from you as nearly as you can remember and I will do the same. After that there will be little room for doubt, even if either of us feel any great amount of it now."

"A fair test that, and a shrewd one since nothing in either letter can give any informa-

tion to any one save the one for whom it was intended. I accept it."

Blaine held up his hand.

"And if the true General Rawle comes in with all the dash of yore how can I explain my presence here with a brace of conspirators?"

"He will not come," answered the man, speaking positively. "He is about at the end of his tether. He is fully engaged with visitors that he is receiving elsewhere. I see I will have to convince you later on; but you may, know that I have all of my old time confidence in you since I am not afraid to have you listen to our conference."

While he spoke, his fingers were at work, and the two had finished their scribbling simultaneously.

What was the result of the mutual inspections would be told by what followed, since the two turned from the table for a brief caress.

Then the man held out his hand to Blaine.

"A few words will tell you my story, and explain to Regina all that it is necessary for her to know."

"I have had some experience in the Far East with audacious criminals; but never have I before met with a man like this Raven."

"He must have been in service at the same time as myself, and I think he had at some time a personal acquaintance with me. Certainly he knows much, very much, of my past life; and aided by a strong personal resemblance and a wonderful facility at disguise he might easily personate me with strangers, so long as I was out of the way."

"You know how Alvah Wharton died. He was my brother-in-law, and his will named me as executor and residuary legatee. He was supposed to have committed suicide after losing his fortune in speculation; but I know the last is incorrect—and I have reason to believe that he was murdered. Unfortunately for the desperate men in whose hands he fell he had hidden his fortune away, and sent to me the clues to find it."

"This Raven probably thought that I was dead."

"He had reason enough, since in the Far East he had assumed my name and face and turned toward me the vengeance of three men whose father he had robbed and slain after having won his confidence."

"Had these men wished to kill on sight I would have been lost. They are even yet deceived, and three times they have had me in their clutches. All the story is too long to tell now; enough that their eyes are partially open but that my own safety depends upon my showing the false general as he really is, both to them and others."

"You brought me into contact with him. Perhaps until that time he thought me dead, for he had here, again, fearlessly appropriated my belongings. If I did not then reveal myself to you it was because I had plans with which I could not allow any interference, and it was just as well that I did not know that my daughter had been adopted by this consummate rascal. He had my diary, and made use of it. From that he could tell you dozens of little trifles that would convince you of his identity more positively than would an unpremeditated conversation with me."

"To-night, as you know, the stranglers were again upon my track; but they made an open attack, and for that I am always ready."

Conviction was stealing upon the major; and with it a shame of his great blunder.

"I give it up," he said. "This has been a night of surprises, and I see now what a fool I have been. How can I ever obtain your forgiveness for so aiding, as I have done, your worst enemy? And I even connected you with this great crime, done no doubt when you were far enough away. I could not measure time."

"Say no more. I know your loyalty—perhaps you will be able to aid me yet. There is a chance that Raven will return here. If he does he has the brazen courage that would lead him to attempt to beat me out of my own belongings. In that case, without you it might be a year before I could prove my identity. In that time what plunder would be left behind?"

Blaine lost all reticence at that, and at once began to tell of his own adventures that

night, of his meeting with Captain Hardy, and how Hardy had his suspicions, and sent him there in haste.

"He may get on the track of the true murderer—for, of course, I do not believe that you had a hand in it—but if he does not, it is more than likely he will be here soon. Then it seems to me it would be well to take him into your confidence and tell him the story that you have told me. I will wait here and, after an introduction, will vouch for you, if you think that would be the best."

"Thanks—a thousand thanks. If he was here I would avail myself of the offer, though I care little to stay here to-night. It is not safe for me; but for Regina, if her identity was once known, it would be more than dangerous. The blow struck at her may be at any moment repeated. After the hours of horror through which I passed until I discovered that she still lived, I wish to run no more such risks. This place is full of danger and she must leave it."

"But when will you go?"

"Never mind. Regina and I will find a safe place for her until our troubles shall be all fixed up. Will you go with us?"

The recollection of Captain Hardy came to Blaine, and without hesitation he answered:

"I shall remain. I think it more than likely that Hardy will come soon, and he would think it strange if he would not find me waiting. I must give an account of my stewardship; and rest assured I shall do it in such a way that the protection of the police will be ready for you at any time you may claim it. Your Eastern stranglers are already sought after, and from this time on they will be marked men. If they once show their faces in daylight or lamplight you will have no more to fear from them. Good-night. Here is my card. Come in the morning, or send to that address your whereabouts; and if at any time you can use me, do not hesitate."

With a parting hand-shake Blaine dismissed the two, and again threw himself into his chair.

It must be remembered that for some time one of the great objects of his life had been to bring to grief the crew of criminals known as the Gilt Edge Gang. Now it seemed certain that he was hard on their trail, and with a better understanding of the wonderful facts in the case than any other living man.

For this reason he was anxious that Hardy should come, since he acknowledged to himself that he would be perfectly willing to have assistance. If Hardy delayed, and the *soi-disant* General Rawle put in an appearance he intended to take him into custody at all hazards. If proof of nothing else should turn up to hand, the fact that he was not aware that the victim of the assassination at his rooms was not the young lady he claimed as his daughter, was so suspicious that he could be held until the result was known of the investigations that would now be intelligently made.

He was willing to give Captain Hardy credit for placing him in the way of the discoveries he had made; but he was sure that no one but himself could have obtained the information that he had come from the true General Rawle, or understood its true bearings as thoroughly. As he thought it over his hand from time to time wandered to the revolver he carried; and though he did not shrink from it he understood the danger of the possible struggle with the desperate criminal he was seeking to entrap.

While he was considering all this, and every nerve was ready strung for action he heard a firm, quick step outside, with enough of the military about it to be strongly suggestive of the general.

Blaine had no intention of showing his hand at once; and though recognizing the danger of it, intended to meet his quondam friend as though he had learned nothing at all and see if he could not learn a great deal more.

There was no hesitation or knocking at the door which flew open with a readiness that left Blaine little time for further thought.

To his surprise Hardy strode into the room, looking keenly around, and giving a grunt of anything but satisfaction at seeing the major sitting there by himself.

"You're here, are you; nobody else about

I suppose? Might have known it. A crook would get news to Rome and back again while I'm finding out what's going on around the corner. If they'd put the entire police force into the City Hall and slump the whole thing off the nearest wharf there would be a chance to start fresh that wouldn't hurt anybody but the men on the cross. I'm sick of it all, and I've half a notion to resign to-morrow."

The captain seemed in a tearing bad humor, so much so that Preston Blaine held his peace for the time being, preferring to wait and see what was to come of it. As he made no answer Hardy went on:

"Of course you didn't see any one yet; and it's just as well you didn't or there would have been a botch! From what I heard at last the Gilt Edge Gang have the dead medicine on the general somewhere, and the painted fraud that was here has probably bolted with lots of his plunder. I was a fool for my suspicions, yet somehow they got away with me."

"I don't understand," put in Blaine, hesitatingly.

"I mean that for about five minutes I took stock in what that young rooster said, and got 'way off. That was the reason I sent you here. I came to my senses about the time we snatched a well known bludgeoner on the next corner. He gave the whole thing away. Who do you suppose your old man was, that was sneaking around here after the general?"

"Who was he? How can I tell? Perhaps General Rawle himself."

"Rawle—the old Harry! It was the head of the gang; and he was trying to get word—as I suppose he did—to the precious female that posed as a sister to the vanished Lizzie. About her he wasn't so definite; but, if two and two make four, then, when we find it will prove that the damsel aforesaid was the missing Miss Lizzie herself; and if she don't know the exact inside history of the murder here you can call me a double-headed lunatic. I've passed the word around, though, and when the pair are found, as found they shall be, there will be developments enough to stir up the city."

The major listened in helpless amazement, and there was only one question suggesting itself when the captain ceased.

"You may have the key in your hand, all ready to unlock the mystery, though I doubt it. Explain one thing, and then perhaps I can see my way clear. Who is this Lizzie, and what relationship do you think she really has, either to the Rawles or the man you speak of? I can hardly believe that Miss Regina would have made an associate of one who was linked so closely with the criminal classes. Certainly she did not come unrecommended."

"You've hit the blot without half trying. It was the one thing that staggered me. The rascal didn't, and either couldn't or wouldn't speak straight out. But if he told the truth all through I recognize his picture, and the original of the likeness might well deceive the Rawles, as she has already deceived others that ought to know better. She is a wonderful woman, with nerve for a dozen, who has long held an equivocal position, though by a few only it was known that she was working for the New York detective force. Her name, according to general repute—and, indeed, except when working in disguise she has no other—is Madam Velvet."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PIPER STRIKES HARD-PAN.

A THOROUGH shock is sometimes all that is required to bring a man to his best senses. It was something that way with Preston Blaine. He had had a series of shocks of late, and perhaps this was the hardest of all. He looked at the captain keenly, but the somewhat grizzled face told no tales.

"Look here, Captain Hardy, once for all, what are you telling me this for? It's not the usual custom of the Department to take in outsiders, and either you are stuffing me with nonsense to see how far you can play on my credulity, or you expect me in some way to serve your purpose. What is it?"

"I'll tell you, Blaine. In the first place you wanted to go into this thing on your own hook, and you started with so much nerve and success that you scented an outsider

worth taking in. Besides that, since Rawle's name got mixed in, you became valuable from the fact that you are the only man, so far as we know, in New York, who has any personal acquaintance with the general that dates back any distance, or who would be likely to have his confidence.

"And it is through him that the mystery must be solved. We may and will catch some of the rascals anyway; but it will take work to get clean to the inside, and learn all the springs and motives."

And the major was thinking to himself that if they waited for him to discover the mainspring of the concentrated attack on his friend, they would wait a good while, since he always just missed his chance. He had one at hand, no doubt, that evening, if he had acted with any wisdom since, from the exclamation of the false Katie, the paper she found in the dilapidated trunk was what she was after. And now she and her ally had got away with it, leaving nothing behind to draw them back, and were doubtless laughing at the extraordinary way in which they had befooled him. It was no wonder that he did not care to give a history of what had transpired there since he had entered the room.

Neither cared to confess his own bungling, or yet to throw up his connection with the case.

"I can tell you one thing, Hardy," said Blaine, speaking slowly.

"Perhaps you know it already; but if you don't, it is worth making a note of. I understand that Rawle is executor to the estate of Alvah Wharton, and that he suspects not only that there has been foul play, but that the gang was at the bottom of it. It is not certain that they succeeded in gathering in the plunder they were after, and it may be that the general in some way is standing between them and their booty. That would explain a good deal; but it would not explain the murder here, unless that was an unpremeditated affair. To my mind you have got to go back to the Wharton matter, as a starting-point, and work from that down."

"Or from this back to that. Oh, I see. This brings us around to the ravings of that young Tyler again."

"Do you think there can be anything in them?"

Blaine spoke eagerly, for in that possibility he recognized the chance that Hardy might be entirely off of the scent, and be not so much of an idiot as he suspected.

"Perhaps. They will be investigated; but very quietly. They touch men who have been above suspicion—your friend for instance. I can tell you no more. There is no need for you to stay here longer. These rooms are now under surveillance, and I will know who comes and goes, though I have little hope that your friend will be in to-night. I am only afraid that he will never come back. I wanted a little time to think and to rest and I have had it. I am off for work now, and as I cannot see any way to use you, my advice is for you to go home and go to bed. I'll post you in the morning."

"Thanks, but I am not neglecting business that badly. I've got half a column to write up about this affair, and I'm not sure but what I'll give New York a sensation."

"Hold on, hold on! That won't do. Not a word of this goes into the papers. There's been too much said already."

"Sorry, Hardy, but this is business, you understand. I don't intend to give away any of your secrets, but you can bet I'm going to make use of mine. There was some excuse for my being left on the tragedy here—I couldn't have written it up if I had been here, and they've forgiven me for it; but they never would forgive me if I let this chance slip, and any one else got ahead of me."

"No one else shall get ahead of you, that I promise. Store up all you choose, and the moment it is expedient I will give you the word, go. Promise me."

"Very well," reluctantly responded the major.

"Unless I learn something more definite I will hold in; but you have no idea what a pretty story I have been mapping out. I'll look around and if nothing turns up soon perhaps I will take your advice. This is my day off, and they won't expect anything from me anyhow."

"Keep to that. Now I am off to gather

in my reports. I had just a faint hope that the general might have turned up; since he has not, I must try and trail him down. Besides, I want to give them a chance. That woman or some of the gang may come back—that seems to be a likely reason for their trying to get him out of the crowd—and if we catch any one here to-night, we will hear what he or she can tell us, or know the reason why. Come along."

They started out together.

So far the major had been learning all he could, while keeping carefully silent about what he had seen and heard in the intervening time since he had left the captain, though he began to believe he had been deceived again.

Yet there was one suggestion he felt compelled to make, though only at the last moment.

"There's a point I want to give you about General Rawle, whoever he may be."

Hardy turned his head quickly.

"You seem to think it possible that he may have met with some foul play to-night, and talk of trailing him down. Perhaps I can help you a little."

"Then, why in Heaven's name didn't you do it before? Speak out!"

"I can tell you that I don't want to give any points away on my friend, if you are disposed to look at him as a criminal; but this can do him no harm. I saw him leave the hotel to-night, and without knowing why, and part of the time without intending it, I followed him."

"And did you follow him far enough to see where he went to?"

"He vanished; but I caught you on the track of the person with whom I saw him, and he might possibly know something of his after movements."

"Out with it. Who was it?"

"I can't give you his name, but I can locate him for you. I saw him get into a carriage, and I noticed that the carriage was followed by a boy. I lost sight of it after that—"

"Of course you did. Confound the luck. Here is the clew we want, and it only has one end!"

The captain was not only vexed, he was angry, and showed it so plainly that the major felt constrained to tell the whole story, how he met the vehicle again, and where it finally stopped, and how a perfect stranger was disgorged.

"Wait! You're sure of all that? No dream about it—all *bona fide*, and nothing suggested by what you've heard since?"

"My dear sir, you don't think—"

"Hold your heroics. This time you have struck a lead. If street and number are right, and your description of the man is correct, you trailed Judge Wetherington home; and that's one of the names Van Tyler mentioned. Good boy! Here's another glimmer of light, and I'm going to see what it means."

"Do you really think it is important?—if so, and I will not be in your way, I should like very much to be with you. I am a witness in the case, you see. If he claims to have dropped the general at any point where I had my eye on the carriage, I will know there is something crooked about it, and I am pretty sure that the general was not in when it stopped."

"You shall go, and we'll strike while the iron is hot. It is from just such chances as this that the big strikes come. I'll have a couple of men in supporting distance, too."

There was no waste of time now. The captain was in haste since he had an objective point, and when he had made a visit to the station-house and heard some unimportant intelligence, he took Blaine with him and started post-haste up-town.

"It's an unpleasant piece of business, this," said Hardy, as they got out a square below the house of Judge Wetherington.

"If it's all a mistake, and the judge understands what I'm feeling after, he may make me any quantity of trouble in the future. He has a heap of influence with the boys, and it's pretty near treason to suspect him of anything crooked; but I'm going to see the thing out if it takes my head off. Is this the place?"

He pointed at the house they were passing, and the major nodded. He had no difficulty in recognizing the place.

"Then we'll go back and raid it."

They wheeled, and at that very moment the door opened and two men came out and made their way down the steps to the sidewalk, and they heard one of them say to the other:

"Arrah now, cully, can't yez shut yer eyes a minnit while I skip out o' this? Yez can't m'ane me any harrum; but all ther same yez may git me into h'apes av throuble."

"Walk along," responded the other. "I've got my orders. Maybe when you get through you won't be so full of breaking into people's houses."

"Heavens!" whispered Hardy to his companion. "That's Paddy the Piper, or I'm a liar."

CHAPTER XXVI.

MR. BRADLEY FROM CHICAGO SHOWS HOW THINGS OUGHT TO BE DONE.

JUDGE WETHERINGTON's supporters took to their work so naturally that it was plain to be seen that they had their instructions. Paddy the Piper, if this was the genuine article, had no chance to demur whatever might be the intentions of the judge. The revolvers looked him squarely in the face with a deadly aim, while their holder was just too far away to be reached by a sudden move, and just too near to admit of any dodging.

"All right, thin," said the covered man, quite coolly.

"It's no use, ther game ye'r' playing, but have it yer own way. Ye'll see me later I s'pose, in anither shape, an' that'll do jest ez well. But don't yez thry any av yer snide games. Ther men as could thrack yer here ain't goin' ter let yez git away wid me."

"I do not profess to understand you. All I mean is to have my man see that you leave this neighborhood and then to caution the police that if you are seen lurking around again to run you in at once. The fact that a politician can't afford to act too precipitately is all that prevents my giving you in charge now. As it is, neither of us need say anything about this interview, and so there will be no harm done."

"Sure, and you're a sly wan, but av yez won't thrust me here mebbe yez will somewhere else. Ta, ta."

And so the man went jauntily off. Evidently he had not great fear of his captor; and really he was not far wrong in thinking that the intention was to slip him out of the house with as little trouble as possible. What was to follow afterward was the question he wanted to have solved when he incautiously raised his voice so loud that it was overheard by Captain Hardy.

As he spoke, he gave a quick glance behind him, as though the idea had occurred to him that he might possibly have made a mistake. Fortunately his range of vision was somewhat limited, and did not reach to the inner side of the pave, where the listeners were prudently hugging the wall, and as he heard nothing suspicious, he turned again, and darted at his enforced companion with a skilled swiftness that meant business and promised immediate results.

Hardy felt the intention even before the execution began, and was ready to act. Flourishing a club, he sprung out from his semi-concealment, and rushed toward the two, who were woven together in what seemed to be a desperate hand-to-hand struggle. From the taste he had had of the desperado's quality, the captain was inclined to think the Piper would leave an ugly mark on any one man who tried to stand up against him.

Hardy was quick, but so were the combatants. He heard rather than saw one of them go down with a crash, and then to his intense surprise, he recognized that the under man was Paddy the Piper, and that the other had flung him heavily, and then twisted his wrists behind his back, and was snapping upon them a pair of handcuffs.

"What does this mean?" asked Hardy, more astonished than delighted at finding a stranger, though apparently a policeman, poaching in his preserves.

"It means," said the stranger, rising coolly, "that I'm Jake Bradley, from Chicago, and hard to beat. Oh, I tell you, when we once start in to trail a man, he may as well throw up his game and save his money for the lawyers. I've got him anyway, but it's been a six-months' chase. Who are you?"

"Hardy, of the regular force. But I don't understand your game."

"I've told you; and I'll have a requisition for my man by the time the law-mills around here open up for the morning grind. I telegraphed them a week ago that I was on the trail—to get the papers ready."

"But that don't explain what this man is charged with, or what right you have to arrest him."

"Don't fret yourself about him; he's a bad man, and murder's the charge, and you can tack on to that about every other crime you can mention. You'll find him all wrong and me all right. I don't mind sharing out part of the proceeds either, if you do the square thing. I want you to run him in for me to-night. This ain't the whole of the job by a long sight. I've only been here for a couple of days, but I've dropped to the biggest thing on hand; and, as I say, if you're willing to do the square thing on the divvy, I'll take you in on the ground floor."

"You'll find me square enough when I once know for certain that you are all right. But you had better look a little at that man. You gave him a terribly hard fall, though how it was done I can't see yet. And if his skull is not fractured, you will be lucky enough."

"That's O. K. He don't move because he can't, but in a couple minutes he'll be the liveliest flea you ever tried to put your finger on, if he can only get the darbies off. I feel him begin to squirm now."

The major was listening to this conversation in a bewildered sort of way, and it was only now that it struck him that his companion was trying to belittle the capture made by the other, either in the hopes of getting some points, or in some way taking the credit of the arrest to himself.

"Well, you may be right enough, for I recognize the man as an old offender, that has been wanted for some time. I'll see that the keys are turned on him, but I want to have a little talk with you. You came out of a house I was just going to visit, and I want to know something more of what took you there, and what you know about the owner."

"Hush!" said the man calling himself Bradley. "That's the point I want to give you. It can't be worked without me, and it's too big for me to tackle alone in a strange city. If you've got a man near here that you can trust with this covey call him up. When I talk I don't want him listening."

This was said with an air that had its meaning, and Hardy did not hesitate. Paddy the Piper was a prize worth looking after, no matter to whom he belonged, and even at the risk of losing trail of others for whom he had been more directly looking. Hardy had a couple of men within call and at a light rapping they made their appearance and cheerfully dragged away the yet unconscious man.

"Now come across the street with me, and walk along slowly down, while I give you the points. That fellow is a big gun, and I was bound to have him, but there's a bigger behind him."

"You sure?"

"Yes sir-ree, hoss-fly; and I'll tell you how the thing's got to be worked. I got in with a rough that they call Big Mike, and he rung me in on the fellow that hangs out there. I was to carry out a sham game that may be was to fool some one and maybe was for the sake of looks. You know where Ferd's is?"

The apparently irrelevant question was a surprise. "Ferd's" was a restaurant on which the police had more than once cast an eye, though they had never been able to lay finger on the crooked spot they suspected was there.

Ferd himself was a natty young fellow of twenty-nine or thirty, who knew how to keep a restaurant, though he had only been in the business for a year or two. Before that he had been identified with sporting matters, and if he had not broken down just when form was most needed he would have been the champion sculler of the year. He made enough acquaintances during that triumphal part of his career to help him out wonderfully afterward. That, of course, explained the presence of so many sporting men at his place. If some of them had a record on the cross, Ferd could not help that, and it

was hard that he should have been suspected on general principles.

So Hardy had admitted to himself more than once, but now he wondered whether he was to fall into a nest of information when he least expected it. He did not show the interest that he felt, but simply nodded and said:

"Of course."

"Well, there's a man going to meet this snoozer I just laid out, and I want an old reliable, whose word would count for something when they put him on the stand to be around and hear what he tells him. Then we'll run them both in."

"But that's all dough. Paddy the Piper wouldn't help to rope in a pard to save his own neck, and if he would he couldn't, for you've just knocked him silly. He won't be able to talk for an hour."

"That's all right. So much the better. I'll do the talking for him. Ferd will put us in a box, and I'll put you in another, and if the cove knows the difference, you'll have a chance to find it out. That's my game. Now, if you're willing to back me up, give us your hand on it clean through. I'll show you how we do such things out West. Is it a go?"

"If you can do as you say—yes. I've heard of you before, and I'm willing to take you on trust."

"It's an elegant game, if nothing interferes to spoil it in the playing. I must have a word with Ferd, though, or she won't take much stock in you. As for your friend, he'd better go home. Two of us are better than a dozen to run this thing, and he'd only be in the way if the shooting began."

"There must be no shooting," Hardy answered, hastily. "And for this gentleman—Major Blaine—I have particular reasons for having him along."

"Exactly. Kind of suspects there's something not altogether straight about me. You're fooled on that, but maybe you're right in another way. I can work two men better than one, anyhow. He won't be in much danger, either, if I do all the heavy work. Will try it on, anyway."

"Just you make a clear case, and I will be around to grab. But here we are. Go ahead if you think you can make satisfactory arrangements."

"That's right. Wait here three minutes, then come in and follow wherever they offer to put you. I'll square things."

Off went the man on his errand, leaving Hardy and Blaine, a most impatient pair, standing watching and waiting.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AND ALL CONCERNED FIND THEMSELVES IN A HOLE.

WHEN the two strolled into Ferd's they did not appear to create any excitement. Though in the five minutes' grace their advent had apparently been prepared for.

A waiter beckoned them aside and led them straight to a room that was small enough to be only a stall.

"Will bring your orders in," said the man, with a wink, departing as noiselessly as careful steps with list-slipped feet would allow.

"Either one way or the other we'll know something before we get through," whispered the major, after a glance at his surroundings.

"Do you think they have planted us here to get us out of the way; or are we going to get to the bottom of a wonderful mystery?"

Hardy raised his hand.

"Say nothing. Our friend, the waiter, will doubtless be back in a moment. After he has gone we can look and listen; but the less we say the better. I think this is a revelation."

He already had his eye on a spot in the wall which seemed to mark an opening left or made for a purpose. When the waiter had left the steaming oysters that had evidently been ordered by their mysterious partner, Hardy pursued his investigations, and found that his suspicion was correct. Through the peep-hole he could obtain a limited view of a room, and what seemed strangest to him was that the room was evidently in an adjoining house. He had been doing Ferd Hale the rankest kind of injustice.

Instead of being in league with the thieves he seemed to be assisting the police.

While Hardy looked, some one entered, and he could hear voices quite plainly.

"Arrah, thin, it's yersilf, come at last. D'yez think I've nothin' ter do but wait till youstroll in? An' ye didn't want ter know me whin it war all roight. Fur two cints Oi'd bu'st yer jaw, comin' here wid a new set ov heavy harness on, thryin' ter look like anither mon. What did yez do wid ther girrul?"

"My friend, you evidently mix matters, and take me for some one else. I know nothing about any girl; and I certainly had no intention of meeting you here when I came in. I met you here the other night, I'll admit; and from what followed I am inclined to believe that you sold us out. If so I am only glad that we acted cautiously. If the knowledge that we hold your neck in our fingers is not enough to keep you straight I can't see that we have any use for you."

"An' it's you that charges me wid sellin' yez out. Sure ther boot's on ther other leg, if it's anywhere."

At the very opening of the conversation Hardy looked bewildered.

Unless sight and hearing befuddled him, the two were General Rawle and the Simon-pure Paddy the Piper.

And if one was a fraud, which one was it? Or might it not be both? Rawle's voice recalled him from his speculations.

"It will do no harm to tell you that the man who took your place died suddenly, and that he has been known and wanted under the name of Craig Clayton. I've done you a good turn, anyway."

"Craig Clayton?" answered the supposed Irishman. "Who is he?"

"You should know—unless you've lost the notch-stick with which you keep the account of your private graveyard. But that is neither here nor there. I wanted you to meet the friends, and see if we couldn't come to an understanding. Unfortunately there was a hitch in the programme, and it is not so certain when they can be got together again, unless you can explain how it was that some one came in your place, and was posted in all the points and signs I had given you. I believe in you; but there are others who do not."

"Sure, an' it's thim ez can't see a hole in a ladder. It worn't me as give it away. Av yez don't belave it fale av me schkool. Roight here is where ther spalpeen hit me ther whack ez laid me out."

He laid his finger on the back of his head, and bent toward the general in an insinuating manner that could hardly be resisted. The chief of the Gilt Edge Gang bowed forward, extending his hand as if to examine the spot.

As he did so the little man lengthened out, slinging his right fist and shoulder in one terrific blow, that drove the other back as though he had been shot, and scarcely had he touched the floor when the pretended Paddy the Piper, active as a cat, leaped upon him, and attempted to snap the handcuffs on his wrists, as he had done with the other.

Hardy could not restrain himself, but uttered an encouraging cry. He had heard enough to convince him, and had no doubt but that with such positive information to work from, evidence could now be unearthed that would convict the general and utterly destroy the gang.

He made his outcry, however, before he had got out of the wood.

The two had passed from the range of his vision. Now he heard a rush of feet in the room beyond, a muttered curse or two, the sound of several blows, and then all was darkness and silence. It was any money and no takers that the chief had once more made his escape from the toils of justice.

Captain Hardy had been nervously anxious all along, for he feared a pitfall of some kind. He was in haste to have it over, and yet dreaded the arrival of the catastrophe.

The truth was it was hurried somewhat.

Though the evident object of the detective was to lead the other to a full confession, he had suddenly become aware that the two were not alone. Fearing treachery, he precipitated matters, hoping to get the handcuffs on before there could be any interference.

He did not take into account the hardness of the skull at which he was striking. Van

Tyler knew better than to use anything less solid than a slung-shot, and if he ever had a chance to make a second trial the detective would know better, too.

The wrists writhed from his grasp, and the hands caught at him. At the same time there was a rush and the lights went out, while blow after blow was aimed for his defender's head.

Hardy boiled over with impotent wrath. He threw himself at the wall, but that was solid enough. Minutes were precious, and he knew of no way of getting into the room without going out, and boldly entering the next house. He called on Blaine to follow him, and rushed to the door.

"What's the matter? Anything gone wrong?"

The questioner was the natty waiter who had ushered them into the room.

There was no time for lengthy explanation and not much for consideration. Hardy only gave a hasty glance to identify the man.

"Everything has gone wrong. They've found out the man that brought us here, and are killing him in the next house. Can we find our way in?"

"I told him so!" ejaculated the waiter, in a short, sharp way, that seemed to betoken that he was not altogether unprepared for the intelligence. "This way, quick. I can put you right in, but I'm afraid we'll be too late. Are you heeled?"

"Of course," replied the captain, holding up his revolver.

"Then shoot first and reason with them afterward. Follow me."

Drawing a pistol from his hip pocket and giving a little tug at Hardy's coat collar, as if to start him in the right direction, the man darted away, the others keeping close in his wake.

He led the way along a little hall, and bounded up a narrow flight of stairs.

"Come on!" he cried, as he threw open a door and plunged into a dark and narrow passageway.

Hardy and the major were close behind—they would have sworn they were right at his heels.

Beyond them they heard a sound as of a pistol-shot, muffled by intervening walls, and the noise spurred them on.

"Hurry, hurry!" said Hardy, breathlessly; and just then there was a sharp click, and with scarcely time for a cry of alarm he plunged downward in the darkness.

Captain Hardy stepped right into the trap; but the major failed to follow. At the snap he halted, and on the instant knew there was treachery.

His revolver came out, ready cocked, and he partially wheeled as he gave a step backward. His impulse was to retreat, at least to a known standing-ground.

But Blaine was none of the men who desert their friends in danger. He stayed; but instinctively crouched close to the floor.

Just in time was he, for a heavy blow from a cudgel came whistling down over him.

His unexpected movement saved him, for his assailant overreached himself, and in so doing was carried a step forward by his own momentum, his knee touching the shoulder of Blaine when he crouched.

The major recognized his chance, and before the other could recover he had completed his wheel, grasped him around the knees, and with a quick, powerful heave had flung him clean over his head.

To Blaine's surprise there was no instantaneous crash; but the explanation suggested itself at once. There was an open pitfall, and the traitor had followed Captain Hardy into it. What its nature was, and whether either or both of the men were killed, was what he wanted to know. Detective Bradley, or whoever the man might be, who had led them into such a scrape, might look out for himself, if indeed he was in any danger. It looked rather as though the whole affair had been pre-arranged, to inveigle Hardy and himself into danger.

He listened, but could hear no sound of footsteps, and was inclined to think that he was alone, and that perhaps it was the work of the one man.

At any rate, as he was unable to move safely in the dark he was willing to run the risk of being seen by others who might carry on the attempt against his life. Holding in one hand his revolver, that he had momentarily

discarded, with the other hand he struck a match that burst into a clear little flame just in time for him to see a section of the floor close with the same ominous sound that had been heard once already.

Whatever had become of Hardy, he was shut out from him completely; and the closed trap in that imperfect light left no outline to mark its position.

Beyond, the way seemed to be barred by a solid wall.

"There is nothing I can do here," thought Blaine, rapidly revolving his chances.

"Some one, who knows that two men dropped through, is working the trap, and if the mistake is once discovered they will be around to murder me before I can find my way out and give the alarm. I'll try for the back track. Lucky that I kept my head cool and noted which way I was going."

He raised to his feet as the match, burned to his fingers, gave a last dying flicker.

Then, suddenly, the little hallway was illumined, and looking over his shoulder, his finger on the trigger of the pistol he thrust that way, he saw, standing in the narrow doorway that had noiselessly opened at the back—Regina Rawle.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ALL ON THE WAR-PATH.

AT the sudden appearance then of Regina Rawle the major was dumfounded.

Was he deceived again; and if not, was she living or dead? He began to think that she must be something unearthly in any case.

Not so with the young lady. She started first, and would have fled; but turning one more glance upon him she recognized his features.

"Oh, Major Blaine, have I really found a friend, and have you come to our aid?"

"Regina," he said. "How does it come that I find you here? It cannot be that you have your home in this den of murderers."

"No, no. We have been entrapped and betrayed, I and my father. His life is in danger at this moment, even if he be not dead."

"Regina, answer me. Is he your father? What is this strange mystery that binds you to him? I cannot believe that you are his accomplice—I can scarcely believe that the honorable soldier I once served under could have sunk so low. Yet I have seen with my own eyes and heard with my own ears. Your father is in no danger, since I know, beyond a doubt, that he controls the gang of ruffians from whom you profess to be fleeing. If you would not share their fate come with me at once from this spot."

"You mistake, you mistake, as I did, or almost did. Oh, we told you the truth this eve. It is the false General Rawle who has deceived you. My father is a prisoner in his hands, as I was, unknown to him, until I found my way thus far out. Do not fail me. Howard will be here soon, but it may be too late. There is not a moment to lose. Will you go back with me?"

For answer he flung up his pistol-hand and fired straight down the passageway at the man that had just entered it.

The shot struck home, and none too soon, for, as the man fell, a revolver dropped from his nerveless fingers. He was an enemy that Regina might have found it hard to pass.

"Now," said Blaine, with sudden decision, "I am willing to follow you. I trust you, and I will do my best, if you swear to me there is no time to go seek for aid."

"No, no! Come at once. Perhaps we can find the way to their cells. The road is open."

Partly through chance, and partly through reason of previous information, Regina had stumbled on the secret of a connecting door between the two houses, and through this Blaine followed her. In any event he was finding a way into the house in which he had reason to believe the mystery of the Gilt Edge Gang could be solved. And in case that could be accomplished, he felt that he was not leaving Captain Hardy to his fate.

The worthy police captain, meantime, was holding his own better than the major suspected. At the moment he found that he must go without remedy he made a desperate effort, and whirling over once in the air, he alighted on his feet clear of the trap in the

room below, tremendously jarred, but practically unhurt.

He stood there, perfectly silent in the darkness, with all his senses on the alert, unwilling to risk a single movement, and it was a stern test of his nerves to bear the rush of a body just behind him, that passed on and downward. He had not a doubt then but that it was Preston Blaine. When the trap-door closed, he felt that at every hazard it was time to do something, and with the coolness that was natural to him in danger, he struck a match and lighted a small bull's-eye lantern he had in his pocket. Then he steadily examined his surroundings.

Not three yards away lay the body of a man, bound and gagged.

To partially loosen this man was but the work of a moment, when he had once determined that life was there.

At once the stranger sat upright and stared around him.

"Who are you?" asked Hardy, cautiously covering him with his revolver.

"Hector Rawle," was the positive, prompt answer; "and if you belong to the police, as I suspect, you have landed at the spot where of all spots you are most needed. This is a den of thieves and cut-throats, and if I am still living it is because they thought they might have some further use for me."

"I belong to the police, as you may find to your sorrow. This General Rawle business begins to get more and more interesting. If he keeps on growing, there will soon be a dozen of him, and if there were twenty I'd pull him all in the first chance I got. He has become a suspicious individual. What is he doing here?"

"I was decoyed here to meet a woman known only as Madam Velvet, who professed to have some information that would be of value to me. Instead of a woman I found the man who has personated me; and backed by his gang, he robbed me of some money, and papers that are worth a thousand times more."

"And is he here yet? I must have him, whatever else is left untouched. If he has left the house, then the sooner I find my way out and get a force to raid the building, the sooner we will get to the bottom facts and find poor Blaine."

"I think he has gone. I saw him but a moment, and he gave his directions in haste. I hope and trust he has not fallen in with my daughter, whom I left lingering near. You may trust me to aid you, for if I may seem to have been erratic, I swear to you it was but to defeat the machinations of this rascal who was plotting against me and mine."

"I believe you," replied Hardy, shortly. "I don't take long to make up my mind, but if you have deceived me, so much the worse for you. There; shift for yourself, or follow me."

The room was not specially adapted for use as a prison, and there was but little difficulty in forcing the lock of the door.

As they emerged into the hall the captain flashed his light along the narrow passage, and it fell upon two men who, at the occurrence of the unexpected, drew hastily back into the doorway through which they had just slipped.

Without hesitation Hardy dashed after them, General Rawle following closely in his wake.

With a couple of leaps they cleared the intervening space, and so promptly were their movements made that the four went tumbling down a stairway together.

"Look out for the knife!" shouted Rawle.

The warning was none too soon, for the two men had suddenly turned at bay. Though Hardy was quick as could be on the defensive he would hardly have been in time had not the general struck as he spoke, and by chance or skill he put his blow where it would do the most good. The man dropped and his blade dropped to the floor, the clanging sounds being almost drowned in the rush of feet. Half a dozen masked men were gathered around the intruders, while a bright light flared upon the scene.

"You may as well surrender," said the other of the two who had fled. "We don't want any shooting if we can help it; but you fire a shot and down you go."

It seemed worth while for Hardy to hesitate. His companion was unarmed, and it

was really six to one, while these men looked as though they both could and would use fire-arms. To advance would be madness, while to retreat was as impossible. The door above had swung shut behind them, and while fumbling with the spring-lock on the stairway they would be a fair mark.

"You infernal fools!" retorted Hardy. "You had better throw down your own weapons. I'm only here a couple of minutes ahead of my men. You can kill me, but I tell you they'll have you later on. If you try any monkey-shines with me they'll swing you sure."

"We'll risk that. I guess when we get you we get all there is left of you; and if we don't, things can't be any worse. If you've got brains throw down your pistol and hold up your hands; it's the last time of asking."

"Down it is!" exclaimed Hardy; and at the same time he took a snap shot from the level of his hip, and plunged forward, the general springing to his side.

Then there was a confused medley of shouts, shots, strokes, the two men working away like a little army, until Rawle went down with a bullet in his shoulder, staggering back and falling just within the reach of the man he had struck, and who had now fairly recovered his senses.

"Curse you, I've got you!" ground out the fellow between his teeth as he knelt over the prostrate man and raised his knife. It looked very much as if the end had come.

Only for unexpected aid it would have come.

While the knife glittered in the lantern-light some one sprung clean down the stairway with one desperate leap, and fell upon the would-be murderer with a force that crushed him face foremost to the floor. It was Preston Blaine, who, led thitherward by Regina, had burst through the upper door, and flung himself into the melee with all his old-time reckless intelligence, striking hard where he saw the first head. After that he leaped to his feet, unharmed though a little shaken.

It was four men to two by this time and Hardy was already so much the worse for wear that another moment would finish the game, when what seemed to be a solid section of the side wall swung open, and a man with a broken arm hanging limply at his side staggered out.

"Keep it up, Hardy!" he shouted. "My partner outside has got the hang of the thing and called in the police. Here they come."

It was the other Proteus who had led the captain to Ferd's.

He punctuated his words with pistol-shots, and dropped at least one man as he spoke, while above could be heard the crash of a door and the tread of feet. Guided by the voice of Regina Rawle above, and the uproar below, the men directed thither by Charley Rand made their way straight to the spot.

As they were stout, resolute fellows they did not hesitate a moment, and their simple coming was all that was necessary to discomfit the remnants of the gang. They broke away and attempted flight.

"After them!" cried Howard. "Follow them close or they'll dodge you. They are on the run now, and they can run as well as they can fight."

It was scarcely worth while to waste his breath. The officers saw how desperate had been the struggle and did not mean to miss the chance to gather in such a batch of criminals, or allow them any start into the intricacies of the place. They darted after, in a close pursuit, which was speedily successful.

Captain Hardy was pretty well hacked, pistoled and pounded; but he was hard to kill, and the instinct of his profession was strong. He shook himself, decided that no vital harm had been done, and then looked around him.

"We've got what's left of the gang this time, sure," said Howard, advancing.

"We have it down fine on the man that has been posing as General Rawle, Judge Weatherington, and half a dozen other interchangeable characters even if I missed him a moment ago. And these men I can swear, and you can swear, are his accomplices. Unfortunately I scared them out of their regular place of meeting, though I can show

you where it is, and they may have left some pickings behind. This is a temporary affair here, but I wouldn't wonder if you could find enough to satisfy 'most anybody of what kind of a nest it is."

"And whereabouts is this delectable den?" asked the captain, staring around him in an uncertain way.

"Well, Ferd's is on one side of it, and Madam Velvet's on the other; and if I'm not mistaken her jurisdiction extended over the two houses. She'll tell you when she gets back."

"Perhaps. But where is she now?"

"On the trail of Edgar Raven, the chief of the Gilt Edge Gang. If she don't bring him to grief before morning I know nothing of what a vengeful woman can do."

"But I don't understand how he managed to slip out—or why they didn't kill you when they had the chance."

"Small blame to them; if they didn't it wasn't for want of trying. They were afraid to use shooting-irons, and I beat them off, and was ready to shoot myself when the floor opened under me and I went down as I fired my first shot. Then some one pitched down on me from above—he's in there now," indicating with a motion of his thumb the cell from which he had emerged, "and he's dead as a herring."

"And you've done all this. By heavens, you're no slouch at your work; though I don't understand yet how you came to drop into the game."

"I am Hector Rawle's son and I was fighting his battles as well as my own—even if I was half deceived by Raven. For myself, Captain Waite was the man I was after. I'll tell you why in the morning. For the present you'd better clean up here and go on to the nearest station-house. After that you'll have time enough to raid Copper Sile's and the house next door. I've got some relatives here that I want to see myself; and then, after the surgeon has braced me up, maybe I'd better stay and bring Madam Velvet around when she comes in."

CHAPTER XXIX.

A DYNAMITE WRECK.

JUDGE WETHERINGTON had, in conjunction with his assistants, made a double capture. When he had seen Paddy the Piper hurrying or hurried away, he turned to give his feminine captive attention.

He had not yet entirely recovered from the shock of the revelation, yet he seemed to have no doubts; and after once penetrating the disguise of the sex, there seemed little reason why he should have.

He went down the steps leading to the cellars in a thoughtful mood, and rapped at a heavy door. Then he pushed back a bolt on the outside which was answered by the turning of a key in the lock from the inside. The door opened and he entered.

His beetling-browed assistant stood there, with a grim smile on his face.

"I've drawed ther kinchen's teeth," he said, extending his hand toward the judge. "Here's a nice little tool she tried to lug out, an' I reckon if she hadn't been in such a thunderin' hurry to use the pop she might hev got in some mighty nasty work when ther heavy part ov ther game begun. Ef she can't bite she may scratch, an' you'd better keep an eye on her. Sich cats are solid lightnin' when they begins ter yowl."

"No roughness, if you please," said the judge, quietly. "Miss Rawle has been acting very strangely, and seems to be in league with desperate parties, but I desire to protect her as well as myself, and I know she will pardon me if I adopt methods that seem a little out of the way. Until I had got rid of that desperado it was necessary that she should be in perfect security. Now I hope less strenuous methods will be sufficient. For a time her life was in danger—it would be yet if that man or his partners could reach her."

"And what do you intend to do with me now?" the prisoner asked coolly, and in her most flute-like tones.

"To keep you here until I can break the intelligence to your father and bring him here. You already know what has happened, and can judge from its effects on me what the shock will be to him."

"And this, I suppose, is the lady of the house?"

She pointed at her jailer, who stood listening with a smile on his coarse but not altogether brutal face.

"He is a man that we can both trust. A man occupying the position in politics that I do sometimes requires a body-guard, and I selected this gentleman with reference to his character as well as his slugging abilities. You can be certain that he is thoroughly reliable."

"As much so as yourself. If you think to deceive me any longer, you are much mistaken. I will wait in patience to see how far you will go; but I warn you that if, meantime, you meet any of my friends, of whom I still have a few, it will fare hard with you."

"Thanks for the warning; but I am abundantly able to take care of myself. I am sorry that I am compelled to put you under seeming restraint, but I can see, if you cannot, that you are in more danger than I. I must go now. Think no harder of me than you can help, and when your father comes he will explain all."

He added a few words in a low tone to his henchman, and then took his departure. This time the jailer took his position on the outside of the door, which was again bolted. As the key was left within, the prisoner had the option of locking herself in, which she did without loss of time.

After that, for half an hour she maintained a complete silence; and the jailer, if he was about, was not heard from.

He was there and on guard, however, when a seemingly different gentleman made his appearance.

The new-comer stepped with an air of certainty that betokened familiarity with the place, but if looks went for anything, this was General Rawle himself.

"Ah, you've come," said the watcher. "Been a-waitin'. Where's ther jedge? I 'spose he's posted yer on ther p'int. Quiet as a mouse in there now; but watch her. She'll wake up lively enough. I don't believe she hes any too much love fur her parient, an' she's took it too cool not ter hev some plan afoot. Pears ter me she's a leetle cranky in ther upper story. I'm sorry fur yer, general, but maybe she'll come 'round all right in time."

He spoke loud enough to be heard by a listener in the room beyond, and in spite of the warning "hush," which perhaps was no warning at all. Then he pushed back the bolt and tried the door, which was still locked from the other side.

He rapped sharply on the door, at the same time that the other exclaimed:

"Regina, Regina! Open quickly. It is your father. What is the meaning of this terrible deception—or is it Wetherington that has been deceived?"

The bolt in the lock flew back and the girl's voice gave answer:

"No one has been deceived. I know you now in whatever shape you may choose to come, and in every shape you are a fraud. If it was not that I want to trace your villainy to the utmost limit I would resist you here and now. What is your pleasure? I will yield to it until I know certainly what is your aim, and how far it will carry you. After that, beware!"

"Yes, yes," he said, soothingly, much as though he was humoring a sick child. "I understand, and I accept your warning. But, come; we will not stay here another moment. The judge may have been a little harsh; when you came to him in such a guise how could you blame him. I will give him my thanks again. He could not return with me—he went to the police station to see what disposition had been made of the ruffian you saw. I hope he is safely lodged behind the bars. From what I hear you are in danger with him at large."

He had placed his hand lightly around her arm and was leading her away, while behind him walked the man who had played the jailer.

A carriage—the same one that she had successfully tracked thither—was drawn up close to the curb in front of the door, and the two entered without hesitation, while their follower climbed up by the side of the driver. Then the vehicle rattled away.

It was some little while before it halted; when it did so and the two had stepped out they were on a lonely side of the street, in

front of a small three-story building, the front of which gave no sign of any life within.

"Well?" said the prisoner, fearlessly, but with inquiry in her tones.

"It is well," responded the general, as quietly.

"My mission is about ended in this city, and I do not care to take you back to the hotel, which has its memories connected with such horrors. For a day or two you will rest here. To-night I came in possession of the papers relating to Alvah Wharton's affairs. He had been preparing for a bolt, and the money we here looked for in vain has been deposited safely enough abroad. As I suspected, you have an interest in it, and I shall see to it that you enjoy it. Then I shall go back to the old roving life in the Orient, only this time you shall be my companion."

While he spoke, she allowed him to lead her unresistingly, into the building. Only once she looked over her shoulder, to note that their attendant had descended from his seat by the driver and was following close behind them, while the carriage was already whirling away. The doors closed behind them, and she stood alone with the general in a dimly lighted room.

"A very pleasant programme, Edgar Raven, but what if I resist?"

She turned and faced him coldly as she spoke; but her words seemed to strike him with more strength than if they had been ever so passionate.

"Why do you call me by that name—where did you chance to hear it?"

"No difference. I know not if it be your true one; but it is more likely to be than the one you have tried to bear with me. You are not Hector Rawle—you are no father of mine."

The two stood facing each other, and their eyes met steadily. In spite of the disguise it was not hard to trace the features of the girl he had supposed to be dead; and it was time now that he should decide on a question he had expected to hold open for a time longer at least. So it was that he spoke slowly:

"A week ago I would have feared to say what I intend to now, but the last few days have shown me that there is danger in delay. I will tell you the whole truth and then you may judge. And first I give you my solemn word, that while I knew of your existence, I had not the faintest idea of meeting you, or that you were in the city when I decided on the only course open to me to obtain the large amount which Alvah Wharton was indebted to me. I had been a friend of Hector Rawle in years that are past; but, as you have just said, I am Edgar Raven."

"Man alive! have you the courage to admit this wicked, this monstrous attempt at deception? Where then is the true General Rawle?"

"Dead—buried at sea, as I only happen to know."

The other gave a backward step and threw up her hands to her face, as if overwhelmed by the intelligence.

"It was cruel, I admit it, but at the time I decided on my course I had never met you. I did not unmask when you first dawned in on me, and after that it was too late. In a day as it were, you were dearer than a daughter, and I had decided that you must never know the truth until I could fully justify myself. With thousands at my command even if I never recovered all that Alvah Wharton had fleeced me of, I would so surround your life with blessings that to me you would look for the continuance of its brightness. And when I was certain of my ground, then, then I would tell you all."

"And you dare to tell me this? Edgar Raven do you think the history of your past life is unknown to me? Or are you mad enough to believe that I could ever trust you again were it only for this first grand deception at our meeting?"

"Do not be hasty. I know it is like hoping against hope; but if you will give me time—and you must and shall do it—I can remove the evil impressions that I see have been made. The life of Edgar Raven has been a strange one, entangled with that of another for whose deeds I have been blamed and suffered. When you know all you will know that I have been more sinned against than sinning."

"And so the upshot of all this is that you intend to keep me here a prisoner. You know little of me if you think to win in any such way. You have said your say—and very little have you made out of it. I do know your life—every dark nook and cranny of it. It has been a violent—a vile one. For that, perhaps, I have no right to reproach you; but for the wrong you have done to me rest assured I shall take ample vengeance, and your own folly has given my hand the chance to strike the blow. Edgar, your career is finished at last."

She spoke solemnly rather than in heat but her words bit to the bone. Something in the altered tones of her voice made him stare at her with a nervous shiver, and then draw himself up as if bracing himself against a terrible shock.

"Ah," she continued, "Edgar Raven, you know me now?"

The woman drew her hands over her face and seemed to push away the last remnants of the double disguise.

"By the eternal heavens!" he exclaimed. "It is Madam Velvet!"

"Ha, ha! Your eyes are open at last. Did you think you could befool me utterly to the end? You are a very Proteus in your disguises, but I have followed you through them all. You murdered my young life, strangled all that was good and true in it, and left me stranded and alone, groping in the dark for years in search of you, and still vowing vengeance. At last the time has come."

"I believe you," he answered, coldly, his icy coolness coming back. "I have used you again as a blind instrument; since your eyes have opened for a little it is time that they close forever. Ah! Down with her."

Her hand moved swiftly toward her bosom in search of the second revolver hidden there, but as her fingers closed upon it, from behind her arms were clutched in a grasp of iron.

The woman gave a start and a cry. For the moment she believed that she was betrayed by her hired tool, in whom she had trusted.

But it was Raven himself that was deceived. He had played for many thousands in his time, and more than once had he thrown his life into the stake; but he had always had the cards stacked in his favor, and known the size of the hand that would probably be out against him. This time there was an unrecognized element in the game.

The hand on Madam Velvet's arm did belong to Big Mike; but he did not come to betray her. With a sudden swing he flung her around behind him, just as three nimble figures dashed past, and threw themselves upon Edgar Raven.

These coming was a surprise, yet he had time to draw and fire one shot that did not miss its mark, though the next instant a dexterous blow knocked the weapon from his arm, and he was coiled in a life and death struggle with the trio.

Overmatched though he was in numbers his magnificent strength would have borne him through, perhaps, in a stand-up fight without weapons, though these men were wiry, active, made of steel, and full of desperate courage. Their fingers clutched him everywhere to tear him down, yet once he shook them all off and drew back his arm to strike a straight blow from the shoulder out. It was then that a noosed cord fell over his neck, and while one drew taut, the other two nimbly sprung upon his shoulders.

Madam Velvet's eyes turned toward and were glued upon the struggle. She had no mercy for the man she hated and now would have stayed to see it to the end had not Big Mike forced her toward the door.

"Let me go," she said harshly, trying to push aside his hands. "I must see it all."

"No, no! Quick! I know more about him than you think. It's life or death now. Another minute will be too late!"

He fairly caught her up over his shoulder, and rushed away as she saw Raven, with the three men clinging to him, staggering toward the opposite corner of the room.

Big Mike flung open the hall door, and stumbled downward into the street, unmindful of the little hands that clutched and tore at him.

Then behind them, in the house they had just left, there was an awful, smothered

roar, the crash of breaking beams and falling bricks, and the wreck and wrack of a shattered building.

Madam Velvet stared wild-eyed at her comrade.

"Dynermite," he said, coolly. "He knewed the end were here, sure. You hed him ez he was, if he even got the better ov them three; an' he jest thought it were time to go out ov ther damp, an' take ther hull crowd along. There's a heap ov money, a lot ov corpses, an' ther main guy ov ther Gilt Edge Gang there now; but we're on ther safe side ov ther mix, an' we'd better stay so. It wouldn't be healthy fer me ter be found 'round here; an' I guess you'd better sherry."

Half-dazed by the sudden end of her quest, Madam Velvet allowed herself to be led away.

CHAPTER XXX.

GRAND FINALE.

CAPTAIN HARDY was not surprised when Madam Velvet did not show up that night or the next morning; he was when Howard Rawle revealed to him his identity, and finished unraveling the tangled hank of crime which as yet had been only partially understood.

The police had paid a visit to Judge Wetherington's late residence, but had found no traces there of the man they sought. Evidently he had prepared all for flight, and had left behind him nothing of value but the furniture. Even Thomas had looked out for himself, and skipped. Afterward a discovery had been made, of which Howard was not aware until he had finished his story.

In the first place he frankly confessed that he was Craig Clayton, under sentence of death for a murder he had never committed. By that name he had been known to his worthless associates when he was having his fling, and he had been careful that the name of Rawle should be saved from disgrace. He had lived in hiding and disguise for years, and had learned a good deal about the dangerous classes. One of his hiding-places had been the building now occupied in part by Copper Sile, and that worthy himself was not as well acquainted with the hidden ways about the house.

He had had plenty of money—largely the result of a wonderful piece of luck on the turf—when a gang, which he knew was under the leadership of Waite, had inveigled him into their hands to be killed. Fortunately he had it safely stowed away before he went into the slaughter-pen; then came the murder of the man with whom he had had a foolish quarrel, and his story that his own life had been in danger went for nothing when the police broke in and found him with a smoking pistol still in his hand, and what seemed to be a letter of his in the apparent victim's pocket.

But Waite and his men had been frightened away for a time, and when he had made his escape he went down for a time into the slums, but afterward grew bolder in his disguises. For some years he had owned half of the double building in which was Copper Sile's, and had had eyes on the gang that had its headquarters on the other side, though he cared nothing about them until they began to strike into his affairs. Then he went for them, at first believing they were the Gilt Edge Gang. It was only at the last moment he discovered the existence of a second gang of a far higher grade of criminals, and that Mike Cordova, true only to Madam Velvet, was a connecting link between them, though unsuspected by either.

Through all, his sister and one friend had been trusted and true.

In the guise of a detective he had arranged with Ferd for the use of the stall at his place, and had been keeping an eye on the building between the saloon and Madam Velvet's. As a result he became aware of the plot to bring "Paddy the Piper" and his men into the shoes of the Gilt Edgers, and he had made the desperate resolve to have Waite spirited away while he took his place. It was necessary to keep the rascal hidden, since if he was turned over to the police, there was a chance of his being discharged, and a certainty of his capture leaking out.

The result of the meeting had evidently

excited the suspicion of the man known as Conyngham, and one of his men had been worked in at Ferd's. It was through his treachery that Hardy and Blaine so nearly came to grief when he led them into a passage that had been planned by Madam Velvet as a rear entrance to her gambling-place, and that led through the house that held some of the secrets of the criminals with whom she had been linked.

It had been by chance that Regina had met Lizzie Waite, and quite a time before they knew that she was a sister of the criminal whom he had so much cause to hate. Even then they trusted her, save so far as any knowledge of Howard went, though knowing she was in communication with her brother. But never once had they dreamed of danger to her.

"And you think we have the entire gang?" said Hardy.

"Well, I think we have gathered in the remnants. They are men you would hardly have suspected, though I think you will find they have all been in desperate straits in the past. You know they belonged to the gang, and there will be no trouble about sending them up for a long term even if they don't stretch hemp. The most remarkable thing that I see is the wonderful way in which Raven managed to conceal his identity from them."

"And Madam Velvet? I suppose she was in the mire as deeply as the rest of them?"

"I'm afraid so. But she had her eyes open. When she came to me she meant to break up Raven and his gang, and she did it after a way. The gang is gone; if Raven has escaped I shall be very much mistaken."

"How so? He was not in that crowd last night; and once away, with a start, you might as well try to hunt a flea in a haystack."

"I will tell you. The three stranglers followed to the madam's my father who went disguised as an old man. Raven went away in the garb of General Rawle; and they followed him. Sooner or later they will find him, and I think this time they mean to kill him on sight so that I don't doubt he'll get his punishment."

"That explains it then."

"What? anything new on the subject?"

"Simply that they found him in another of his dens and the desperate villain blew up the whole shebang with dynamite. He was ready to leave, and had his plunder with him. I found spoils enough to show what he had done toward pauperizing the land of Egypt; and I found some papers there that belong to your father, if he can really prove his identity beyond dispute. The Wharton racket is cleared up at last. Fellows like young Tyler were only accessory Thugs; Raven and a few men with brains managed the head-work. They got Alvah in their toils. He found it out and when he made a few lucky hits he got his funds in shape intending to settle with his *bona fide* creditors at his leisure. Then he was taken off, and the gang discovered they had been too previous. Raven fancied that the general was dead and I guess was working the Rawle racket for his own advantage. Oh, there will be a howl when the case is opened up. And some of the big guns that used to drop in at Madam Velvet's will sing mighty small till the racket is closed."

There was quite a howl, as the captain had prophesied. The Waite set were, for the most part, ordinary ruffians—for Waite, though still a dashing, reckless man, had gone downward in the scale of his associates—but about the true Gilt Edge Gang there was a sensation. They were men who would have been the last to be suspected of some of the brutal crimes of which they had been guilty. Their prosperity had been wonderful, and it was not strange that they wanted to retire with their wealth.

Madam Velvet disappeared and left no trace. When she had taken Howard Rawle into her confidence she knew that, however well he might keep faith with her, the game was up; and Big Mike, when he let her into the secret of the retreat at Sile Kettle's knew that he could no longer carry water on both shoulders, and the madam's affairs on his back. He had managed it very cleverly, for awhile; but now, when she went, he went too. He could not have told much of

the gang, but he might have said a good deal about Judge Wetherington. The madam left little behind her. The gambling-room over which she had presided proved to be one of Raven's investments—backed by him in the guise of the old money-lender who had visited Clifford Melton. Of her own distinct following, Carlos was gathered in during the raid, but he held his peace; and as General Rawle had not recognized his assailants, and knew nothing of what had transpired at the madam's, the result was he was "turned up."

Poor Lizzie was buried by the Rawles; her brother, though he escaped the gallows, was buried in State Prison.

Captain Hardy's investigations resulted in a full pardon for Howard Rawle; and the family was once more united.

Alvah Wharton's affairs were disentangled through the papers he had sent his brother-in-law, and which Raven had so narrowly missed when he captured the general's baggage. The residuum was something handsome, and, as a measure of what he considered simple justice, Hector Rawle transferred it to Regina as a dowry, when she married Preston Blaine.

The general did not go back to the East. United again to his children, he found it more to his taste to enter into active business life. The firm, which embraces the general, his son, son-in-law, and Charley Rand, prospers, and its members are happy.

Van Tyler was never brought to trial. He spent some little time in a lunatic asylum, and finally disappeared without much question of what had become of him.

Clifford Melton realized the narrowness of his escape. Once in Raven's net, and that villain would have used him in schemes against his own father. He might have supped sorrow as it was had not the madam sent him a note, ordering him to remain at his rooms until she sent for him. He got over his infatuation rapidly enough; but was forever grateful for what he knew was an intention to save him from being drawn into the meshes of the Gilt Edge Gang.

THE END.

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